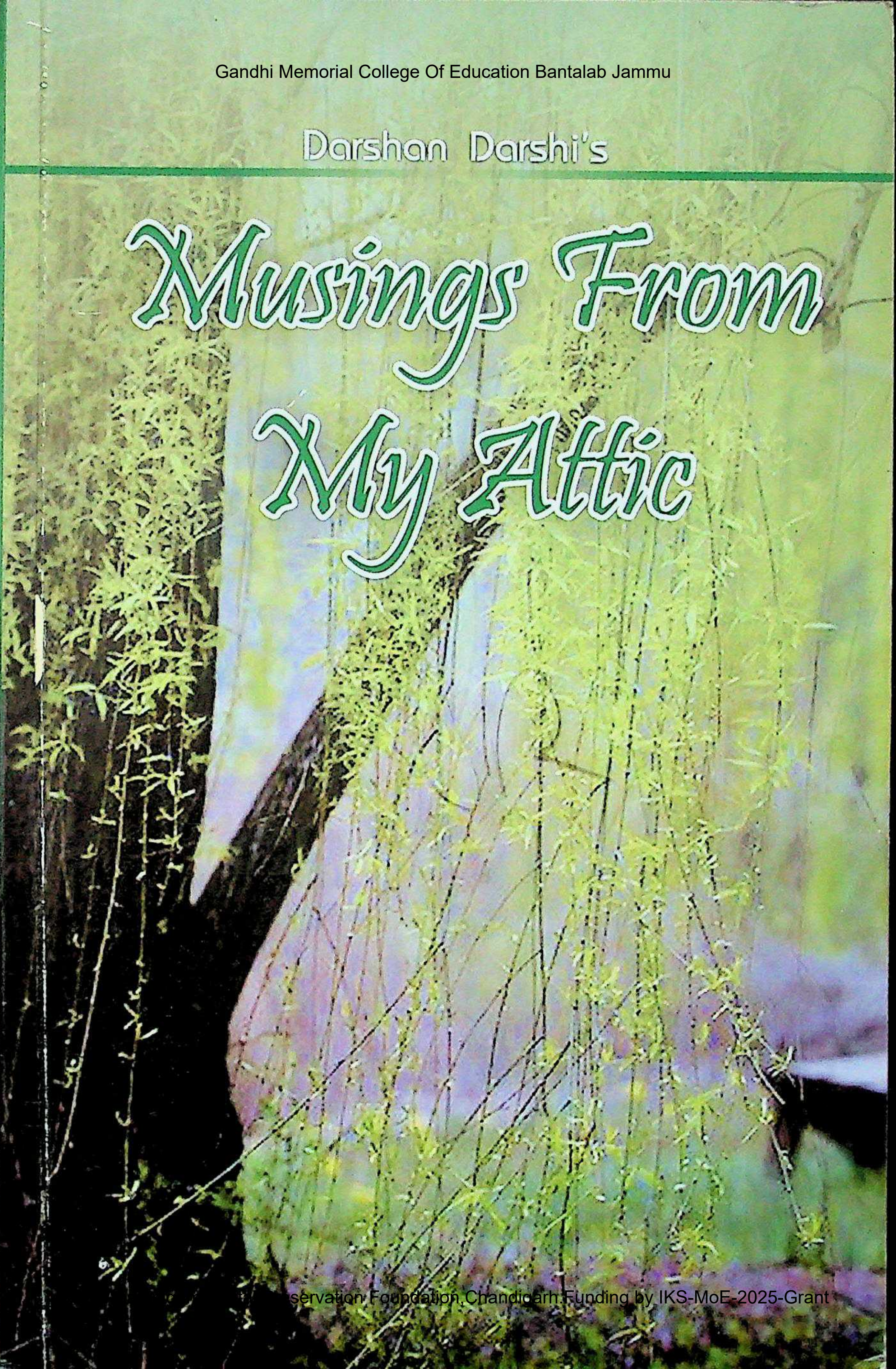
Darshan Darshi's

Musings From My Attic



Darhsan Darshi's

अग्निशेखर और क्षमा कौल
द्वारा यह
पुस्तक सप्रेम भेंट

MUSINGS FROM MY ATTIC

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'Musings from my Attic'

(A collection of Personal essays)

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"......And the dead trees
give no shelter,
and the dry stones
no sound of water".

- T.S. Eliot

"Chase your passion
not your pension".

- Den Waitley

To

Mohit and Mehak

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CONTENTS

	Title of the Essay	Pg. No.
1.	A Shrunk with a Difference	-- 1
2.	Languages are not Apples	-- 7
3.	Tricks of the Trade	-- 14
4.	They Want it Big	-- 18
5.	Birth of a Manuscript	-- 22
6.	A Vegetarian Fundamentalist	-- 25
7.	No Mother Tongue Please?	-- 27
8.	Romancing the Rail and Road	-- 30
9.	Of Curd, Confidence and Success	-- 33
10.	The Tale of an Old December	-- 36
11.	Of Age and Money	-- 42
12.	Why do you Come to School?	-- 45
13.	Of Heart, Feet and Me	-- 48
14.	Taj Mahal *mera hai!*	-- 52
15.	What is There in a Name?	-- 55
16.	Survival of the Book	-- 64
17.	Relationship Quotient of India and Pakistan	-- 68
18.	Better Work: Worse Rank	-- 72
19.	Darbar Move - The Pain and Pleasure	-- 74
20.	"Afrain of Each Other?"	-- 78
21.	Reporting Through Parallels	-- 80
22.	Handling an Argument	-- 83
23.	Managing Classroom Anger	-- 89

	Title of the Essay	Pg. No.
24.	May - A Month of Many Things	-- 93
25.	Of Parents and Children	-- 96
26.	Be True to Yourself : No Breach of Personality Please	-- 99
27.	Nurse Your Memory, not Your Machine	-- 104
28.	Patience - A Life Skill	-- 108
29.	The Polgamy of Learning	-- 114
30.	Recipe for Inspiration	-- 122
31.	A New Resolution on New Year	-- 125
32.	Money Matters	-- 128
33.	Of Paying Rent to God	-- 132
34.	Let Your Dreams Walk	-- 138
35.	A Lecture that was Not!	-- 144
36.	Why are you in Hurry?	-- 146
37.	Am I Depressed or Just Confused?	-- 148
38.	Perfectin is a Myth	-- 150
39.	Is Happiness a Grocery Item?	-- 152

1

A Shrink with a Difference

Reaching a right medicine man or a perfect life coach is generally a matter of right search. When the address is correct, confusion is absent. Most of us are so muddleheaded about the address of God that we search for him at different places on different days (Lord Shiva on Monday; Lord Hanuman on Tuesday; and so on and so forth) or search several places not trusting Him to be staying at one particular station (like our forays to char dhams or our pilgrimage of a thousand temples). We harbour similar confusions about all those whom we wish to pursue to seek light, blessings or for a healing touch. We lack not in faith, our processes', mechanism or approaches are actually getting bamboozled because of multiple options being put on our plate. As we tend to run a multidirectional life-race, we reach nowhere and watch with helplessness the unfolding of a life which is so muddled and clueless that getting perplexed is our only choice. A lone wayfarer on a lone highway is very sure of the road ahead till a crossing comes his way to confuse him. When a way branches into two or more paths, a direction sign or a guide is what we need. Doubt which is another form of confusion leads us to quandary and incertitude and at times to, even, a sense of insecurity. But, where this lack of clarity makes us groggy and confused, it may also provoke us to explore, to pursue to search.

Such searches have often led to clarity. However, in the case under description; confusion of a book store clerk; came to me, as a big boon. Mixing up names of authors is not a good manner.

And when the act is committed by one, who earns his living from selling such authors, the act could be termed as a criminal negligence. I too was inclined to hold the book-house worker guilty, but for my fascination to open every book, coming may way, like an excited child who waits not to zip open his toy boxes. As I began to read, I found that book would never need a book marker. Gosh, I would love to invite this type of goof many times over. An inadvertent error of supplier had introduced me to a love story which became my emotional anchor – a shrink with a difference, the one who engages a pair of soul mates to heal your soul.

Well, let me give an account of the anecdote as it occurred. Those days my life, somehow, was running roughshod. A fairly good number of unpleasant things were happening to me at emotional and psychological levels. My financial and social status was also heading south. But above all my self-confidence was persisting to have a holiday. I was growing crankly in head as my dreams and hopes were leaking at the bottoms. What to do? Advice came like fireflies but my darkness needed light not flickers. Some said that all this is mid-life crisis; it recedes with time. Others maintained with the faith of believers : this is a test paper set by God, to test your faith. So hold your belief and perform your karma (action) without aspiring for phel (fruit of results).

Men of finances proffered out their financial advice, sociology experts, their tenets to garner social acceptance; psychology lovers came with the balm of catharsis, life-skill managers with their full baggage of positive thinking and emotional gurus with their edict to adopt an emotional anchor. My real (sic) friends knowing my passion for poetry asked me to seek solace in intellect and verse. Loaded with multiple counsels my brain was a bundle of confusions. And then I came across a very radical metaphor of life through thirty odd words of wisdom. An unheard author (then not know to me) with a gender free name called Terri Guillement says, 'weather is a great metaphor for life – sometimes it is good, sometimes it is bad, and there is nothing much you can do about it but carry an umbrella or choose to dance in the rain'.

Choosing to hold an umbrella against my problems or surrendering before them and dance along were not only available options but two truths of life with no third alternative. I took to umbrella in my matters of finance and social status but allowed myself to get drenched in the rain of life in matters relating to heart and brain. Umbrella did not disappoint me and my money and status got restored soon. A good drench in life rain catapulted my brain and heart to their correct positions and my self confidence refused to go on sabbatical. Later much later in my life, When literature took to publicity and information about authors and books was only a click away I found that Terri Guillemert was a woman from Phoenix, Arizona. She was born in that year which was my year of earning my postgraduate degree. She had been collecting quotes since the age of thirteen. This quotation anthologist of U.S. helped me in strengthening my bruised psychology but my emotional anchor was to be one author who landed at my door because of a confused clerk. Earlier my wife had failed to take me to a doctor for remedying a disease which I knew I never had, but she was certain that I did carry.

Hypochondria, which she believed, was my problem, needed a shrink. And doctors had never been on my list of love. They make you wait in their cramped waiting rooms and then examine you as if you are not a human being but a specimen. You think you are under their protection, no you are only a 'patient'; as good or bad as you are when you are under police protection. Then men in uniform call you a 'subject' (as lamented by Salman Rushdie in his autobiographical narrative of his police protection days). Shrinks and Sheriffs are not supposed to be lambs. But not being a lamb should not be mixed up with not being humane. The love story which my arriving book would unfold will make me cry like a child. The author Segal would become my doctor and emotional anchor. But it was not the Seagull I was advised to read to swim through my lows.

Books are not bouquets. We, in our society neither send books as gifts nor receive them. But I was promised one, and by none else but me. I ordered the book as a gift for myself on my birthday. This particular author was mentioned by a fellow poet. He had even offered to get it for me. I promptly agreed on the author, to the surprise of my friend, but modestly declined his offer of help. In those days of turmoil I was trying to garner support from writers – you may call it a therapy through books. My enthusiasm to get to this particular author rested on another recommendation also. I had encountered similar advice in a sports column by a sports commentator who sounded convincing both in print and on TV screen. He had written in his column : 'If you are driven by a passion to succeed, if you are willing to encounter obstacles and not let them hinder you, if you dream of flying over them and are willing to put in the effort to convert that dream to reality, then you must read 'Seagull' once every year'. Searching Seagull in my small town book-store, however, was a tall order.

The largest book shop of my town was being run by an octogenarian who carried his body and brain with the enthusiasm of a man in his forties. And he was proud of his love for literature and history. You name an author and he would come up with some famous lines from one of his works – as for history, telling you exact dates from world history was his favourite. That particular day he was telling me ruefully, 'Sir, the present readers mostly go for thrillers. No Seagull stuff for them! I will get you a copy on order'. 'Please do so as early as possible'. Ad then I gently added, 'Is it not a little disparaging to speak of authors as stuff'. Mine was only an off the cuff remark with no offence meant for shop owner. But the old man probably got offended. He scowled, 'My dear sir I am third generation in the business of books and words of a world language and refuse to take lessons in English from a writer who writes only in vernacular'. I was shocked as a I never expected such an outburst. My casual comment had caused a commotion. The old man was still busy with his mutterings and had refused to take a 'sorry' from me. It was better to escape the scene. I slipped out into the crowded street. As I was walking loosely on the pavement with amusement sitting on my face I began to feel relaxed after a long time. The abrupt anger of the old man had made me realise that I was better off in comparison. His malady was larger. If I was suffering from a mid life crisis, his was a case of end life crisis. When you come across a person as moody as that, your own mood swings appear insignificant.

The old man of the book shop may have been a poor manager of his temper, his selling skills were not poor. On the morning of my birthday I received my book with a metal book marker as gift. The book, however, was not the one I had asked for. The one I had ordered is a success story, which aspiration management experts use to provide life skill lessons to the likes of me who fail to manage their lives well or suffer from depression at some particular stage of age. This book written by one Richard Bach is titled 'Jonathan Livingston Seagull' and is popularly called The Seagull Story-a story of achievement against odds. But book delivered to me was no self help book-not the type life coaches advise you to read and get rid of the negativities. It was, rather is, a love story full of life. The one which churns your soul and makes you realise the cathartic effect of love. The one not teaching skills of life but the life itself. Erich Segal the author of the small book titled, 'Love story' came to be my emotional anchor I was looking for. Or was love the real anchor? When I finished this book in one sitting or in, as and where position, my cheeks were wet like after-bath underwear and my heart as drenched as a rain ravaged umbrella. This lean book with its darkish-semi glossy paper jacket could be a Bible for lovers and a great Shrink for those who need to lighten the weight of worries with words. I have often used the opening lines of this book to get emotional and weep with the lover – 'what can you say about a twenty five year old girl who died? That she was beautiful and brilliant. That she loved Mozart and Bach. The Beatles. And me

Love since then is my Shrink. I do not read, any more, those books called self help books. Instead I choose to read those love stories which in world fiction are rated best'. Gone with the winds'; 'Outlander'; 'Pride and prejudice'; or 'The Note book'. Having suffered leaks in brains and bottoms I can claim to be one knowing misery inside out. As one who has found the value of love and life I may indulge in the propagation of life rather than life skills. If the theory of love is so soothing, what bliss its practice may be. Let love be the new shrink to make lives escape lows and live life king size. This knowledge has come to me a little late in life, but those who start late will be late indeed. Unless, of course, you, like me, fuel your desire, to seek new dreams and believe with C.S. Lewis that – 'you are never too Old to set another goal or to dream a new dream. 'Well, love is my new hope, my new dream-and a shrink with a difference.

****

2

Languages are not Apples

He was no monk but looked like one. He, in fact, was a Social Scientist who traded in theories and ideas. We were sitting on the breakfast table and he was paying more attention to his words than to the stuffed brown Rotis being served by my wife with a warm visible hospitality and fridge-frozen-home-made butter. He apparently, had not noticed that the pranthas being served were sleek and small-a Dogra version of Punjabi prantha; we keep ours smaller with relatively lesser stuffing and call it *'prunthi'* in due deference to its smaller size and circumference. My guest sinned not only against our *prunthi* but its maker too. He had the temerity to ignore his hostess who was not only wearing her smile suavely but had chosen to support her golden-frame-glasses to look elegantly intellectual. She would wear that particular frame only on occasions when looking pretty was not as important as looking academic. But Prof. Dev Kant, evidently, was not a man of 'nahari' and 'nari' (breakfast and woman). Second best thing he loved beyond his words probably was a set of attentive ears. He had found his second best in my long ears and thus appeared to be oblivious to anything else.

But my wife was not willing to go easy on this oblivescence of our guest. Red in face she moved back to her sanctuary-the kitchen, but not before throwing a ferocious look at me with easily interpretable gestures. She had declared the Professor to be 'a man with mist' supporting a slight hinge in the mind and warned me against inviting such nuts to her dining-table. A pretty long advice had been delivered to me with only a sign. I was reminded of Arnold who said that a woman can say a lot through a single sigh; I could add, 'An angry woman can say many things with a single sign'. The Professor was busy with his words and was not bothered about gestures. And I was amused to find myself saying in silence, 'Garrulity will always remain a poor cousin of gesture'. As if I had said these words aloud, my guest stopped speaking. Looking at the apple basket lying in the middle of the table, he thrust his index finger in that direction. I promptly pulled the apples to place them by his side. He gently picked two of them as I asked, 'Shall I get a knife, sir?' He dismissed my asking with a cursory raise of his eyes and gloatingly looked at the apples. And then he said with a smile, 'Now you take one of these apples'. I obediently did what I was told to do. 'Now you see, we two have one apple each. Right?' 'Right Sir!'. As I said this with a new-found curiosity I asked myself- is this old man trying to play-a game or conjure up some magical trick? I, however, preferred to keep quiet and wait for his next move.

Mr. Dev Kant said, 'Well now you give your apple to me and I will give mine to you'. We exchanged our apples silently. The game was getting intriguing. 'You see the two of us still have only one apple each. This exchange of apples has not been of any profit to either of us.' He stopped his speech and intently looked into my eyes. Having seen streaks of red curiosity floating in my eye-balls, he released an uncouth grunt of satisfaction and continued philosophically. 'Unlike apples, if we two do exchange an idea, we both will have two ideas each in our kitty'. He paused to enjoy the effect of his propounded theory on his listener. I was not only impressed, I must have looked like one, for,, the Professor was grinning from ear to ear. But he was not off his words yet. 'You see, when I pass on my idea to you and you do the same with your idea, we two are adding one new idea each to the one we are sharing but retaining as well. For, ideas are not apples. These can be exchanged and retained simultaneously'.

'Oh I see! It is great, sir!!' I exclaimed with authentic applause. My wife who was at a hearing distance, had heard the Professor very clearly and must have been impressed. But she was not the one to be outsmarted in her own house and on her own turf (read dining table). And that too by someone who had insultingly ignored her. She sauntered out of her kitchen with the confidence of a queen and said with a mild belligerence, 'But Professor, if one idea is rotten, it may spoil the other one too! You know ideas and apples have one identical property-they can turn bad if not preserved properly'. I was aghast but the Professor took the jibe stoically. He quickly broke a piece from the, by-now-turned-cold 'prunthi' from his plate and gently put it in to his mouth. A few seconds of munching followed as if to give his action an authenticity. And then he said with the excitement of a hungry child' What a lovely stuffing – and such perfect baking – not less to keep the wheat-flour raw like a munching chicklete, not more to make it stiff like the sole of a slipper'. My wife's face quickly turned to a crimson-the colour of the rising sun. She quickly bent to remove the plate of the guest and said with a genuine deference, 'Sir, this one has gone cold – 1 would serve a hot one immediately'. As she disappeared into the womb of her kitchen, Professor looked at me meaningfully. His smile was now spreading like the spread of a sun. And then the old man did something which I would never expect from a man of his age and intellect. He winked at me hard.

As I went blushing, he said mischievously 'I do not trade in ideas and philosophies only, I have a wife too, to trade with! I know where to stop in my ranting and start breakfasting'. I looked at my guest reverentially and bleated meekly, 'Sir I never knew that social scientists were good psychologists too! He laughed aloud for the first time and said sheepishly, 'Husbandry and human psychology have been complimenting and supplementing each other since ages'. When the fresh hot roti arrived, I was shocked and dismayed. Professor had also noticed the change but he made no comments. My wife in her excitement had forgotten something which we Dogras often do when in spirits (pun-intended) – we allow our Dogriat to take a back seat. My wife, feeling flattered by her guest's appreciation had ballooned and doled out a fat Punjabi Prantha instead of our slim and petite prunthi. I was reminded of all those scenes where I had seen many Dogras shifting to other languages and cultures under the illusion that their turn out would immensely improve if they give their Dogri and Dogriat an impolite 'shun' and surrender to a false identity. Such people often suffer from an identity crisis. My wife like me was not one of those. She was one who could casually convert a foreign language into her mother-tongue-tone, an English attire into typical desi dress or a South India dish into its Dogri version, and do all this with such ingenuity that one would start doubting the original. Then what happened to her love for 'prunthi'.

It was later in night that she shared with me, 'This Professor suffers from word-diarrhea and I thought that a big fat prantha would match his mouthiness well. Did not you see the size of his morsel?' I had a hearty laugh and thought that understanding woman is a lifelong process. No husband may ever claim that he knows all about his woman, not even the likes of Prof. Dev Kant : But his game of apples had impressed me greatly and I had been contemplating to use it in my class, though in a little different frame, when I would be putting languages in place of ideas. This, I thought would further help me in impressing upon my English literature students, not to shun their original apple (read mother tongue) to acquire additional apple (read English language). My belief that purity of one language cannot be influenced by the other was further strengthened by Professor Dev Kant's theory. As exchange of ideas would give us additional idea, holding to more than one language would make us multilingual. Keeping only one language and exchanging it like that apple of my dining table is a sure recipe of remaining content with only one apple. My chance came as early as Monday next. But it was neither as per my plan nor with my students in the class. It came in the Principal's office where I had to prove to a set of traditionalists that languages are not apples.

It was a nasty winter morning and a Monday. Monday is not liked by many as it forces you to forget that ever loving Sunday – the only day of the week when you do not work and still get paid (Saturday off was generally not in fashion then, neither in offices nor in educational institutions). But my dislike for Monday was not because of some day of a week, it was because of one Mr. Dey, my overmastering Principal. On each Monday, before our usual work, we had to suffer a ceremony called staff meeting. I call it a ceremony because I had never seen any good coming out of these meetings, except of course some inflation of Mr Dey's ego. On that fateful day this ego had to take a puncture instead. And though pin-prick was from me, the provocation was his. The meeting on that day started on a usual note and format, richly buttered with the frowns of the critics for the chair and toadying of the sycophants in response, thereof. I had been always aloof and alone type and the Principal who considered himself a Marxist, desisted me the most. I had heard him telling his closest crony, 'Look Lal, I love to have friends, I can depend on them; I love to have enemies so that I could destroy them and derive the pleasure of being a conqueror; but I cannot handle these cool-types-these *na kahoo se doosti na kahoo se vayer walas* are dangerous; bloody bourgeosie no.. no the snobs of the society. You know the Russian word for snob ... it is ....CHOO how I wish to add three English letters to this Russian word and covert it to our profane Hindustani cuss'. This incidentally – overheard-thing had angered me but I had kept my cool. I knew that the best insult and injury to such people was not to respond and let them simmer in their angst. But on that particular Monday meeting the Principal took on me almost directly and through a subject which had not only earned accolades for me but also the one I was passionate about.

He was apparently delving on his occasional inspection rounds. 'Friends, you all known that I like to move around the class rooms to ensure an atmosphere of discipline in our premises. And it is natural for me to overhear, sometimes, a part of your lecture or talk. But what I saw and heard in one open-air classroom on last Saturday was something unacceptable from an English teacher'. The reference made me alert he was obviously talking about me. I remembered that last Saturday I was holding my class in open. As a matter of pre-arrangement, I loved to teach poetry in open and would reserve Saturdays for this. The principal had paused, as if to create an effect but as his *chamchas* cried in unison to know what their boss had heard and seen in that open air class, I realized that the act was to humiliate me and whole drama was pre-rehearsed. Principal resumed his speech, 'To my surprise and anguish our best English teacher was teaching Dogri poetry in his class and this he was doing in the name of introducing English romantic poets to his students.' Naming was not necessary I was the only English teacher here who wrote poetry in Dogri and propagated that poetry was poetry and language only a vehicle.

And to establish my point I would often take recourse to bring out comparisons putting similar couplets from English, Hindustani and Dogri in one plate, I would endeavour to explain how a poet is effected by his milieu and geography. My students had always found it easier to understand a cold consumed Keats's description of love when I would juxtapose it with a verse from hot Lucknow's Mazaz, a warm Punjab's Batalivi or a temperate Jammu's Mudhakar. And here my best advantage was being tattooed as a sheer folly by my Principal... a man who was not even distantly related to the aesthetics of languages and was almost alien to literature.

I got up to react. That was what principal wanted; an agitated response from me. But I would not oblige him. I would keep cool and do a 'Dev Kant' instead. By then I knew that his Apples-Ideas stuff was not his; he had borrowed the thing from Bernard Shaw, but, I continued to attribute it to Dev Kant. Well, ready to play I got up and said with an un-hurting blunt. 'Sir, languages like ideas are not apples. And I would like to take two apples from your lunch box to prove my point. Having received the apples I replayed Prof. Dev Kant's game with Prof. Lal the closest friend of the Principal. Only that ideas had been substituted with languages in my game. 'You see teaching English poetry with the help of other 'poetries' is like exchanging-ideas-game of Prof. Dev Kant. From one idea to two ideas, from two to four and so on! Similar is the case with exchange of languages. Unlike apple's exchange which will eventually leave you with one each only; exchange of languages (like ideas) would put more than one in your kitty. As I watched the faces of audience, I would see the same amazement there which a couple of days back had smeared my face. But unlike Mr. Dev Kant I did not evince excitement. I only tried to substantiate my point with examples as to how languages have been exchanging apples with profit. Much changed in my life later, including my profession. But, I kept carrying my cool and the belief that LANGUAGES ARE NOT APPLES.

****

3

Tricks of the Trade

It was around middle of November. A time of the year when Jammu is cheerily ensconced in the lap of a pleasant weather and is buzzing with the business of the 'just moved Darbar'! A very perfect season for working and for saving energy in the government offices! The A.Cs are silent, fans are resting in peace and the heat convectors still nestling in the stores. But my euphoria that day was' neither because of the weather, nor on account of the energy saved. My three meetings in a row, two of which were chaired by the Chief Minister and one by the Minister-in-Charge, had gone immensely well. And now I was happily relaxing in my retiring room, bearing a satisfied heart (through received encomiums for explaining things well) and a satiated belly (through the three high teas during the meetings).

In our government meetings, tea and snacks occupy as important a place as the agendas and notes do and the standard of the snacks served is directly proportionate with the size and rank of the person chairing the meeting. The Department of Hospitality & Protocol is the official caterer of the Government and knows its protocol thoroughly well in being lavish or frugal as per the order of precedence. When your mind is free and stomach full, a short nap is what you are entitled to. I was about to embark on this, when the buzzer beeped.

'One Mr. Narinder wants to see you, sir!' my P.A. said in a hushed tone. I could see her scared face through the tremble of her voice. I controlled my anger and said softly, 'Arnie, didn't I tell you ....?' 'Sir, the gentleman claims to be an old friend!' Arnie was speaking unsurely. Neither wanting to take the man on his face value nor willing to take a chance, in case The gentleman actually turns out to be a friend of her boss. I could gauge well her apprehension. All through my three meetings, I too was behaving 'uncertain on many an occasion'. But that was done purposely. An acquired trick of the trade! In our system of governance, we have big bosses and VIP bosses and the small ones like me have not only to know the art of 'presenting' but must possess acumen to 'please'. In the administrative structure where hierarchical order has to be revered and followed like religion, your efficiency is not measured on the barometer of your facts, figures, stats, performance or achievement. It rests mostly on your method of reporting. If you lay your eggs in one go, with the skill of a perfectionist, you are doomed. Take your papers out, slowly, gradually looking at the boss expectantly for encouragement and guidance. Commit minor mistakes deliberately and allow yourself to be corrected graciously. Don't reply to the silly questions of your Big/VIP boss; wait, hesitate and then answer. Shuffle your sheets, feigning feeble grasp and convey the impression that the query is so serious that it needs the back up of notes to figure out a reply.

I had learnt my lessons on this 'acquired process of presenting to please' from no less a bureaucrat than the one who was then Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister. In his condescending tone, he would tell me, 'Mr. D, you're intelligent and prompt, but since you're not skillful enough, you may not earn the grace of your boss'. This civil servant liked to call people by the first letter of their first name. And his reason for this practice was itself an ingenuity. "When I call you 'D'," he confided once, "I may think of you as 'decent' or 'dirty' depending on my mood of the moment".

Well, he was educating me in the art of 'boss pleasing'. 'Let the boss feel that he is the captain there and you're a mere navvy, who can only think or perform through overseer's guidance. Don't reply or produce information promptly on the spot. Say politely that you will have to check up. Then go to your room and relax over a cup of coffee or through a telephone talk with your girl friend. Return to the boss, only after a reasonable time and with unreasonable looks of the labour purported to have been put to collect the information asked for. Now present (to please) that one which you must have been knowing all along and could have bleated out in the first instance. But that could have taken the weight out of the question and the questioner and given you a weight. This even though could inflate your ego, but would deflate your position before the boss. It is almost a case of your ego versus his. Nurturing the first one may raise your self esteem in your eyes, but catering to the second will ensure for you the grace of your boss. And I will advise you to always cater to the ego of your boss, if you want a safe passage in Postings' and 'Promotions'.

The advising civil servant was now looking immensely happy with himself and was watching my discomfort with an open glee. One thing for sure I knew about all bosses and this without learning; that their happiest moments were when their subordinate would itch in discomfort. In corporate sector they focus so much on the 'comfort zone' of their workers; in government, working comfort zone would mean indiscipline. How these disciplined, departments of the government come out with indisciplined performers is a story known to all and need no repeat. But the moral of the story was yet to come out from my teacher of a boss. 'You know' he said matter of factly, 'They would appreciate labour, not wit; asses not aces'.

Arnie who was patiently holding at the other end, beeped again. 'Oh yes, Narinder Who ....?' I said with an intended harshness. Despite my all learning about 'hesitating' business before my bosses, I expected my subordinates to be prompt and perfect and submit all information in just one go. Arnie quickly returned to her original frequency and came out with full facts about the gentleman in question. He turned out to be old hostel room-mate who had snapped connection for many years now. It was certainly my day. After three so called successful meetings, this one with my old friend was for real. Neither the snacks we devoured together bore any protocol, nor did the expletives we used for each other meant any offence. It was hand to hand and heart to hear talk.

Another hearty talk I handled without affectations was on the day of my farewell party. While appreciating the all around assistance of my Personal Assistant, I suddenly realized that I was using some borrowed words of praise. In fact I was lauding my woman assistant in the language of my old boss. The occasion then too was a farewell. My boss, the Advisor to His Excellency, the Governor; was getting his see-off and I as his Special Assistant was receiving my share of happy praise from him. Now, I was giving those very words to my Assistant. If receiving praise makes you happy, handing it out could make you happier. Interestingly, this appreciation which I was now repeating verbatim was pregnant with words like efficiency, promptness, wit, intelligence and ace performance.

Aces cannot go unsung. Only asses would love asses and every boss is not an ass. And here is a case in point.

My old senior who taught me tricks of the trade, when came to be my Principal Secretary in a department, disposed off one of my submitted files as under, 'Where was this file for twenty two days, twelve hours and forty two minutes? Explain!' Added to this note was something scrabbled in pencil! Unable to read that with naked eyes. I hurriedly put my specs on. And as I went through innocuous words, my lips darted apart in surprise and amusement. Two lines were, 'The tricks I taught you were for an ass of a boss, not for the boss of an ass'.

Since that day I may have held back my breath while practicing yoga or to conceal alcoholic whiff from my wife; but have never withheld an answer or information.

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4

They Want it Big

I am very uncomfortable with the MNCs – Multi National Companies. And there are many reasons for that. I will share with you only one; that one of these giants have enticed my son off to a metro where I invariably get lost and always travel with full details of my identity in my pocket, just in case ...! My small town sense of direction is no match to the unwieldy spread of big cities. One of those lucky days, I had been to the 'Big Bazaar' and returned without getting lost.

My son who had just returned from his twelve hour office shift, shouted with glee, 'Hey Dad! Great! You have finally managed your B.C.S.' I was petrified and looked up with palpable perplexity. 'Well', said the son, 'Your Big City Syndrome!' He went to the refrigerator ad fished out two king-size chicken sandwiches. Handing out one to me, he said, 'Big in any event will always outsmart the Small. Be it a city or a sandwich'. We are in the time of Generation Big! Big cities, Big companies, Big malls, Big cars, Big houses, Big cocktail parties and Big dreams! But the 'Big' of the new generation youth does not stop here. They also believe in big biceps and big pay cheques. Only one thing small they believe in is 'family'. Yes, you take it right! The new generation's family means a couple with a kid. No trappings of a pair of 'Maa, Baap' even; not to talk of 'Chacha-Chachi'! Some, even would not hesitate to dispense with the kid, as well; or at least postpone this to a time when they finally get fed up with late night parties. For them the house of their father is a 'parental house' and not 'their house'.

The increasing zeros on the pay cheques of the couple would play a particularly prominent role in this 'My House' and my 'Father's House syndrome. The e-generation is growing individualistic. They let you have no doubt about it. They rest no doubts about themselves either.

The HR in my son's company turned out to be a poet. We met in a party and finding a fellow poet in me, the young HR poured his heart out, just after the preliminaries. 'Do you like your job?' I asked the young man. 'No!' he said emphatically. 'Then, why do you work here?' I enquired. 'For money!' his reply was prompt.

Even before I could lend my exasperation a voice in reaction, he said, 'Uncle! What I like most is a profession where there is no money. So, I have to earn a fairly good deal before embarking upon the work of my choice'. I was getting entranced by the passionate tongue of this MNC worker. 'My Dear Boy! What is the work of your choice?' I queried with curiosity. 'Writing poetry, of course!'.

The young of today bear no doubt. They can chase their passions with a method. Making a tunnel into a mathematical equation and filling the inside of it with the fluid of their sweet will, is no uphill task for them. I remember the young of our times were saddled with several doubts. Holding on to their umbilical cords till their thirties, they generally had neither passion nor purpose in most cases.

Rearing dreams was not uncommon, but clinging on to them with conviction, was. My office files had many a times admonished me to abjure poetry. Well, the poetry, in turn, had advised me to avoid office. No doubt then, that I could neither become an outstanding official, nor a poet of substance. The new unorthodox mechanism of dividing life into periods, as propounded by that HR of the MNC, could never have been conceived in our times. Those were the times of confusion and so called contentment.

The modern youth is neither confused, nor contented. He can bifurcate his life span into earning money and poetry writing. Small modest life with its non exhibitionist ways was almost a standard practice in my times of youth. We never went Big those times.

One thing in big cities, however, is to my liking. These generally have well stocked public libraries and well endowed women. I do have a predilection for both. During one of my visits to that very metro of my son's dreams. 1 bumped into a woman in one of those big public libraries where you have table lamps set in cubicles to make an exclusive study of the rare reference books. She appeared to have taken fancy to my unruly, but neatly coloured, French beard. The modern youth of the 21st century are in a hurry. They don't waste time in introductions. They believe in hitting the 'Eye' then and there. Fifteen minutes into the conversation and 1 knew everything about the young lady. She was thirty eight and was very frank about her age and of being single. In our times, young ladies would start hiding their age after twenty two. Not now! This woman did not look a single day older than twenty four and could be the most eligible bride. She not only chose to specifically mention her true age, but openly told her story of getting jilted twice.

'What are your plans in life now?' I asked. 'Plans? Yes, 1 would like to be CEO of my company in another couple of months.' She had informed me that she was a Deputy CEO of the company for past two year. 'No', I said, 'I don't mean your career, I mean your life'. She became a little solemn for a few seconds, but cheered up instantly. 'Well, Friend', she said and paused. I was immensely conscious of her courtesy for not using that damn God word 'Uncle!'.

'Well, Friend....' she continued, but lingered for a while. 'Yes Life! I do have my share of regrets and sadness. One of them is to say 'no' to the arranged marriage my parents had fixed for me'. 'Then, what do you do to wash your sadness?' I asked, 'I just count the zeros on my pay cheque and have an illusion of happiness' she laughed with the boldness unknown to my generation.

'But the fat cheque is no substitute for a fat life' I told her poetically. 'May be, I have no knowledge of life. That is why you are a great poet and me a mere cog in the vortex of these Bloody Big Companies'. She picked her bag and sauntered away without a Good Bye! I could not see the lump in her throat, but surely it would be a big one. This generation is very generous in its remorse, as well.

I wish, my son could see that lump. That may manage his STS – the Small Town Syndrome. Big and beautiful have only one thing in common. Both start with the same letter. The similarity may not go beyond that. Spirit, not the Size will make a City great. Same goes for Life, Poetry and Profession. Big may be Bold but not necessarily Beautiful!.

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5

Birth of a Manuscript

That day in the club, I asked by friend, 'Do you really care for me?', interrupting him in the middle of his admonishes. His face was a mix of irritation and surprise. He was so accustomed to my meek listening that such like interjection, in between, was almost like an act of sudden violence. But he kept his cool and went on with his banter.

After my retirement. I had adopted the new religion of leisure and pleasure, knowing well that unlike professionals, a civil servant in its retired form is almost a spent force – a fired cartridge – cap which once was a bullet. Special expertise in specific disciplines is in demand in the modern new world of Production, Marketing and Servicing. A civil servant with his' Jack of all trades, but Master of none' skill hardly fits in anywhere, but the government departments. Mercifully, the governments have a system of banning work at a particular age. Many believe that this ban on work is not necessarily restricted to the retirement period and is openly professed and practiced while in active service, much before the D-Day. I was happy with my newly adopted religion and with my garrulous friend. But it was so only till a new passion and profession bit me under my skin.

MY friend, meanwhile, had sensed my intention. 'Did you say something?', said he, with a firm belief that my saying something could hardly be of any consequence.

'Yes, I ask whether you really care for me?'

'Hey! What a query? No head, no tail do you doubt my friendship?'

True to his trait of using a large group of words where one could do, my friend of many words did not reply my question with a simple 'Yes' or 'No'. He looked at me menacingly, his usual gesture to terrorize me into mute listening. But this time, I refused to be cowed down. He must have pondered a while, at my innocuous poser. Two straight stiff gulps from the glass turned his tumbler gasping, but I was persistent.

'But why do you ask such silly questions?'

'Well, in case you really care, I would ask for a favour'.

Beaming with delight, he put his left hand into the middle of my right (no, you take it wrong; he is no leftie) and carefully nursed his glass with his well manicured fingers of the right hand.

'I can give you anything, dear. You ask and you have it'.

'But, this time it is not your giving, I am asking for. I want you to take back something which you insistently have been throwing at me like a spendthrift'.

He grew suspicious and signalled the waiter to get him his fourth. Trusting his drink in his moments of rage, despair and doubt; was almost a habit with him.

Ok, shoot', he shouted.

'Don't expend your advice on me, anymore. Keep it, you may need it'.

The look in his eyes was enough to melt stones. But not me, now. I had decided to renounce the religion of leisure, pleasure and passive listening. My own words were already shaping up and were ready to flow through the pen into that leather jacketed note book of mine. I had planned well my harangue for the evening and was ready to charge further, capitalizing on an opportunity where my friend (for the first time) was appearing clueless and speechless.

'I hate advice unless I am giving it,' I said melodramatically, (Sorry Jack Nicholson, your mention would have taken the fire out of my salvo).

I paused for a second only to see the effect.

'I hate it doubly well when it comes unsolicited. And I resent it when it is thrust upon me and makes my soda flat'.

My friend was staring at me in disbelief. But my last punch was yet to come.

'Here I am an Ex-Boss, always permitting his Ex-Subordinate to go on with his babble, merely to protect the eggs of an old friendship. But not now! Not anymore! My courteous listening has made you conceited'.

The effect was devastating, not unexpected, though. It was as per my design and desire. My friend left his fourth untouched and walked away in stupor. Any Good-bye, of course, was out of question.

Today is my last day in the club with my pen and the note book. For the last three months, every evening, I have been the sole occupant of this distantly laid table. My friend, all these days, was using the bar desk and would ensure that I don't catch him watching me. Tomorrow evening, I will go to the bar table and drag my friend down to our old corner. The manuscript of my first book is complete. Now, I need a listener. My friend will see that I can still boss the words and am not in leisure.

The guiding dynamics of my passionate mind had prompted me to reject my new religion of leisure-pleasure and subdued listening. Having pursued work and word for three decades, leisure and pleasure could not have been my religion. It was a wrong choice. Since my 'Jack of all trades and master of none' skill failed to secure a place for me in the new Market World, I have chosen my own Market. As an Old handler of words and a Jack of all trades, I have treated my manuscript well. Watch out! My manuscript has already got a publisher.

As for my friend; he has, meanwhile, shifted his allegiance. His belief rests in the spoken words; written words are like rebels for him. We are no more co-religionists. A birth of new Faith invariably causes the demise of the old one.

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6

A Vegetarian Fundamentalist

My stomach had been a willing mincer of meat all through my youth, undertaking the chore with the happiness of a crooning lover. Till I met my Waterloo through a institution called marriage. My newly wed was a perfect dove except in her treatment of my stomach. I had neither been a foodie nor an eating connoisseur. Nonetheless, my taste buds were (during the period under report) sharp like my reflexes, ever ready to exhibit its likes and dislikes on the touch of a cuisine. Even the sight and smell would play the Judge and grade the food on the platter. But the rating was always high for a non-vegetarian meal. In Duggar hinterland where I was born and grew, the men generally are meat eaters and the women often total abstainers. This strange paradigm of male female eating habits may be uncommon in other places, but is still quite in practice amongst village folk of low hills and plains of Dograland.

My wife was no woman liberationist, but viewed animal eating men with a contempt, reserved for filthies. Nonetheless, her cop face was apt in handling such emotions with a royal grace.

In a bid to prove her culinary skills, learnt through a well regimented girlhood, my partner started exposing my stomach to fares which my mother had never succeeded to thrust down my throat. My desire to prove myself an epitome of accommodating husband, my poetic temper of being larger than life lover and my 'who cares' attitude for food, were tacitly exploited by my religious wife to win the battle of a faith for which I had scant respect. But his was done slowly and steadily like the tortoise of Panchtantra tales.

Till then, I was not aware that like all non-atheists, vegetables too had a convent and an ism. When alternate day's omelets and twice a week chicken curry in my breakfast and dinner started becoming erratic and irregular, I raised a feeble protest which got promptly drowned in blues of my lovely wife.

My conjugal pleasures left no time to say a 'how do you do' to my stomach. And time rolled on .... My dove, by now, through her passion for vegetables had graduated to be a tigress and knew how to call shots. It started with cooking non-veggies in separate utensils and reached to a 'No meat-cooking in my kitchen' stage, in a matter of dozen odd years. My dear wife was never taken in by the old saying that the road to man's heart is through his stomach. The passing years of our married life appeared to be making my stomach and heart irrelevant for her. Like all fundamentalists, this ism of veggies too, rated all other isms and religions inferior, abominable and *malishe*.

The new researches of the West, rejecting non-vegetarianism was a God given weapon to my fundamentalist wife and the last nail in the coffin of my chicken loving stomach. Like all gentlemen of peace and truce, I silently adopted the religion of vegetables. But alas! Peace in my life is still elusive. My son, a voracious meat eater has refused to forgive me for not being able to protect the cult of non-vegetarianism and accept defeat at the hands of a female vegetarian fundamentalist.

I meekly claim that I am a votary of Women Empowerment, but my son is now grown enough to see through my lies. With the vivacity of a youth, he claims, 'Dad! I'll never vow before fundamentalism of any kind.... be it religion, polity, food or feminity.' I pray for his success. Meanwhile, this vegetarian cult has started getting into my blood also. More often than not, I am bearing the cross more prominently and with airs. Having failed to fight a veggie fundamentalist, I appear to be becoming one. 'If you cannot fight them, join them' is evidently a principle conveniently coined as a face saver by the weak of my ilk.

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7

No Mother Tongue Please?

It was after quite a time that my stay-a-while connect with my home village came to be. The occasion was a marriage in the family and a three days get-together was mandatory. Things in my old village, whose people are other wise highly literate, move under the specific directions of the orthodox elders and age old rituals. A three day formal frolic was on the anvil, besides assembly of all nears and dears. Our main family tree has several branches now and a pair of foreign sons-in-law too. Well, not all, but many made their ceremonious trip to the village marriage. My village folk have always harboured a special fascination for our family events. And this time they had an added amusement of being host to an Australian son-in-law of ours. The reason of my amusement, however, was not related to men and matters alone.

To my horror and to the guest children's delight, my village was found to be full of monkeys. Corpulent or burleys, emaciated or lanky, fit and fine or youthful; all varieties were there and in plenty. Different, though, in their shape and size; they all were skillful enough to take away eatables by stealth and trick of a pick pocket or through forcible burglary of a day light robber.

The scene soon changed from amusement to fear; but the words I heard made me sit up and think. Whereas our foreigner relation was shouting out excitedly 'Dekho Bander! Bander!, all our local ladies and lads were crying out 'Monkey! Monkey!' A new fact dawned upon me, slowly but painfully. My literate village has been bitten by the new bug of an emerging language which bears the shape of English, but lacks the quintessential and character of that foreign language. But there was more in waiting. My love for my mother tongue was in for another shock.

During the lunch, a fashionably dressed young mother was goading her five year old in a language which even ‘Birbal’ of ‘Khichri’ fame would refuse to accept. I could hear the mother admonish her son in exasperation, second time. ‘Jaao handoo wash kar ke aao; nai tein; no bhattu!’ The dress sense of the lady in question compelled me to-believe that she was neither rustic, nor uneducated. I had heard such a speech earlier too. But that was in a milieu where most were not school or college groomed. My literate village too was growing illiterate. Only the educated can have the self confidence of speaking their mother tongue with a sense of pride. I was under the impression that my village has kept that confidence intact. But I was wrong.

It surprised me to note that our orthodox elders have protected the the traditional rituals, but allowed the mother tongue to be rampaged. Or is it that they too have started doubting the age old definition of education and rest their belief in traditions only. Calling a ‘Bander’ by some other name would save these elders from the agony of those words which they hate to mouth in the morning. When ‘Khotta’ is called Donkey’ and an ‘Oollu’ as ‘Owl’, many mornings will survive and sustain their virginity and piety. If the mother tongue gets a drubbing in turn, let it be so. Everything is fair in the name of rituals and orthodoxy. But should a society be as indifferent to its mother tongue as to an ill-omened name?

The societies are fluid like Minds and and always tend to be in motion. That is why our actions in a Society in the form of custom, culture, communication and cohabitation keep undergoing changes. Some of these changes are good, some bad; as generally it has to be. A Movement is a Movement; its directional course notwithstanding. But directions in Movements are what a social system needs to watch!

The study of mothers and mother tongues could be case in point. After the women empowerment, the mothers now are no more the unnoticeables of the society. The mother tongues, on the contrary, are turning unobtrusive. Whereas the new concepts of emancipation and empowerment of women have given our mothers that honour which they deserved; the emerging force of globalization has put many a mother tongues to extirpation.

We have now both Mother's Day and International Mother Tongue's Day. The latter which falls on Twenty First February, however, is only an exercise in reviewing the statistics. As per a report of the United Nations Organization released in January 2011, the number of languages near total eclipse is two and half thousand. India is number one in this 'Demise of Languages'. There are 196 languages in our country which are near extinction. USA with 192 and Indonesia with 147 are number two and three in the world. The total number of spoken languages, the world over today are just one hundred short of seven thousand and many of them are about to expire.

The reasons for this state of affairs all over the world are same as in my remote village. As per the UNO report, the first reason is the domination of the English language and second is the lack of requisites and necessary patronage to the mother tongues.

In this fast growing world of knowledge, information and commerce; English, no doubt, is the link language. But a child of five need not be given lessons in an alien language which he will need much later. Besides, the form and shape of the language being used by this 'educated mother of the five year old will only lead to more confusion rather than clarity.

Mother tongues need patrons and the mothers alone could be the best suited for that. It is not for nothing that languages are called Mother Tongues. Like kids, they need mothers to survive!

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8

Romancing the Rail and Road

I remember having known once, two senior civil servants of J&K who would never board a plane. They would always take a train to reach the national capital and a sarkari ambassador to negotiate between the summer/winter capitals of the state. And not for the sake of romance of surface journey!. They bore neither an Ibn Battuta's itching foot nor Wordswothian heart. They were simply scared of the aeroplane. Well, I had never been. Like millions of Indian Children; born and brought up in a village; I had my aspirations of flying in that plane which often swished over our tin roofed school and filled the building and the boys with a jazzy thrill.

My time arrived when I came to be a civil servant. Flying was possible and that too on government expense. But, by then, the excitement of flying in the air had taken a backseat. During my college and university education, my heart and my budget had gracefully reconciled to each other. Back-pack travels, excitement of hitch hiking and a new found romance for railways had heightened my serendipity. I realized appreciatively that I have itchy feet and decided to keep them where they belong to i.e. the earth and not the air.

My unplanned virgin jaunts taught me two things. First, that there is more to travel than arriving at a destination in haste. Second, that travelling is the best school to acquire knowledge about people, places and things. And this realization and education of my student age has happily stuck to me till date. Except emergencies, I have never taken a flight and can proudly claim to be a man of the rail and road. But one Monisha Rajesh, a London based journalist has floored me. She has traversed 65,000 Km in 80 trains in four months and has joyfully covered the length and breadth of the vast Indian terrain. Inspired by Jules Verne's 'Around the World in 80 Days', She has come up with 'Around India in 80 Trains'!

'I read an article about India's domestic airlines connecting 80 cities', she says, 'and pulled out a map of India to see some of these cities'. Seeing fabulously intricate lines below the air routes, she realized that those were the railway lines. And in moments, Around India in 80 Planes of the airlines advertisement, morphed into Around India in 80 Trains'. She could probably afford the airlines tickets, but chose to board the trains. Nothing could be better for her. She loved close talk and near watching. Train travels helped her in both.

She could have been borrowing my words when she says that air journeys are generic and bland and that at the very most you talk to one, may be two people. Travel and talk have complimented each other since ages. An online survey conducted by British social network Qype found that 51% of respondents had dated or received the phone number of someone they had met for the first time while travelling on the 'tube' which is the affectionate name for the British capital's underground railway system. Indian railway, local or long route, however, is not like the London underground rapid transit system. It is neither efficient in its speed nor as clean in its ambience. So it can't be a nest for lovers. But as it is typically Indian – mechanically, socially and culturally, it is a great family place.

A Long travel in a third A.C. compartment of Indian Railways is almost like living in a joint middle class family of ours. These compartments with their relatively lower comforts but a cozy company, with their average food but affectionate spreads; would take you back to that India where nuclear family was not a norm but an aberration. It also happily accommodates your large luggage.

Yesterday when I returned from Srinagar after attending an ICCR sponsored poetry festival, my wife poetically objectified my red travel bag. 'Well, your bag has travelled its full course'. 'What do you mean?' I could not take the cue. 'From Kanya Kumari to Kashmir!' she said mischievously. We had purchased this bag in Kanya Kumari last year from a shop which was almost perched on a place where Arabian Sea bounces into the Bay of Bengal on one side and the India Ocean on the other. Well, this bag had just returned after sitting coyly for five days in a room which looked directly into the eyes of Dal lake. It, however, appeared to be bemoaning about one inadequacy of its long 'K' to 'K' trip.

The Indian railways could take it only up to Udhampur. Beyond that, it had to sit smugly on the top of a taxi roof, from where it could not see, touch or feel the presence of its master. Sitting on a compartment berth and tugging your bag and baggage below the seat has the secure feeling of hen sitting over its eggs. The Indian Railways; catering to crores of passengers daily; know this bond between the bag and its master and is industriously engaged in connecting Banihal with Udhampur.

Monisha Rajesh has discovered four interesting stations – Dwarka in the West, Ledo in the East Kanyakumari in the South and Udhampur in the North. Monisha, next time it should be Baramulla in the North. And my dear Minister for Railways, Kashmir is eagerly waiting for a train from Kanyakumari, the howl and huff of separatists notwithstanding.

When we compare a journey in the ether with that on the earth, we see that the latter has not only a far higher quotient of connectivity, but is laden with many more quotients pertaining to society and its economy. However, for a poet and pensioner like me, romance quotient of the rail and road is indeed above all. These airlines only lead you to a destination. The rails and roads, on the contrary, immerse you into an experience before depositing you at your destination!.

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9

Of Curd, Confidence and Success

A spoon of curd in my days of childhood was considered to be exercising an influence on getting through a class or obtaining good grades. Once, I did not take this spoon before sitting for an examination and failed. My mother's faith in curd got strengthened. Though there were some who had ceremoniously taken their spoon of curd with all their faith in the good omen and failed. But that will not disturb my mother. They were not my mother's sons and her faith would exercise the magical power on her sons only. She had no daughters; so the magical phrase was the influence of curd on examination taking sons.

She would gently say, 'Don't try to prove me wrong through examples of others. Others have their mothers too and let their mothers find out, whether curd suits them or the honey. It is not for nothing that different people worship different gods and propitiate them through ways and means which are not similar'.

I had no liking for curd. I did not like milk either. Both to me were as disdainful as *ghehia* to most of the children. My sibling was always told by my mother that marks scoring in the examination were always directly proportionate to the quantity of *ghehia* you eat. More the intake of this veggie, more the marks! My poor brother had a great liking for curd, but was always admonished to have more of the said vegetable, instead. I was fond of this unobtrusive vegetable, but was cajoled to take curd. My mother, in fact, was a true bureaucrat. All rules had to be interpreted as per her whims.

It is from the interpretation of the Rules that the power of the bureaucrats flows. If a rule is as straight as a line drawn between two points, then the skillful civil servant would almost be redundant. A mother and a bureaucrat both are apt in first allowing some deficiency to develop and then promptly rendering assistance. An easy way to become indispensable!

The former, however, is loving even in callousness; the latter, unsparingly callous in love too. Exceptions allowed!

My second examination came my way after a gap of six months. This time the holy curd was spooned down my throat with religious fervour amid humming of hymns. Unfortunate for my scientific conviction against things unscientific; I passed through the examination. My scoring was, however, not up to the mark and was attributed to my lack of faith in curd.

My faith in eating *ghehia* could not rescue me, despite my vehement efforts to remind my mother of her propounded theory of *ghehia* and marks. She will buy no argument from a kid of thirteen. Her beautiful curly black hair with streaks of white in them, were not only respected for grace; they had earned the epithet of being most experienced too. Nobody need cross swords with her; much less her small kids.

Interestingly, these sons always remained small for her. Even when they were married off and had their own baggage to look after!

Much later, when I came to possess my own baggage, I was amusingly astounded to discover that my wife who was now mother of two, turned out to be a great lover of 'the curd theory'. The truth came home to me on the day when my son was to take his first examination of life. He was to go for his admission test in a so called prestigious school. His mother was trying to coax him to take paratha with curd, instead of his usual fare. The little boy, through a strange combination of slow and fast, had always relished breakfasting on deep brown paratha and fluffy omelet. He, incidentally, like me, had no love for curd.

Unlike my times, the young cadet did not only refuse to take the curd, but wiped the bowl off the table with such a peculiar flourish that his freshly ironed shirt cuff did never get a smear. His mother's face, however, turned as white as ash. The boy was doomed; destined not to be in that prestigious school; she thought, ruefully.

The boy, however, did not think so and was confident of remembering by rote, all the silly replies I had taught him in the last couple of days. He was declared to be topping the list of the selected! His top merit in the admission test saved me a couple of thousand buck, to be shelled out other wise by way of capitation fees. The 'c' of confidence of a small boy had taken on the 'c' of curd The beaming face of my son brought a proud smile on the wrinkled face of my mother. She affectionately hugged the small kid and said softly, 'The times have certainly changed. The curd may have lost its magic'. My wife had learnt her lesson. 'How could I be so silly?' she muttered.

Since then the status of curd has changed in my house. It is a mere item on the breakfast table, like any other breakfast item. Be it a day of my new presentation in a business conference, or children's test day; curd in my family has its rating as per its nutrition value only and not as an omen of success.

Success rides only one horse; the horse of hard work. Omens, good or bad and the curd, sweet or sour; have never been able to waylay the wayward brunette called success. Perspiration, perseverance and pep are dearer to 'her'. A spoon of curd may keep your mouth cool and fresh, but it surely is no passport to success. Accomplishment and achievement come through action, not omen.

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10

The Tale of an Old December

All Decembers in their third week, in general and last days in particular; come to be so vivacious and lively that one wonders whether this is a beginning or an ender. Or is it the last leap of an extinguishing candle? But the festivities around and after Merry Christmas turn out to be so boisterous, bright and 'spirited' (pun intended) that associating the days with an 'end' is very unfair, to say the least.

But there was one December, some years ago, which closed its calendar by putting thousands to an abrupt eternal sleep. The experience of that, after Christmas December, with quite a few lessons strung thereon, is what I would like to share with my readers.

Born and brought up in the middle of haughty Himalayas, I yearned to visit the seas. A travel to South with spouse commenced. The seas there, however, had some other plans for twenty seventh day of December.

The day, Chennai was visited by Tsunami, we two were on visit there. Our landing, however, was in the evening; much after the return of that dangerous visitor which chose to visit vast lands from Sumatra Indonesia to Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. Strangely, the evening traffic from Airport to Madras Central did not give away any clues of the fearful Tsunami and its devastation which was getting faithfully splashed on News Channels since morning. After checking into a hotel, which claimed to be a winner of HRA 2004 – Lowest Tariff Luxury Hotel Award, I thought of taking on the Beach road to figure out the shape of things there.

'No, you cannot, it is closed', I was told promptly by the cabman who ferried us across the town from Air port to Periamet. The town was not normal, after all! What meets the eyes is not the whole truth. I was suddenly reminded of Srinagar, my State's summer capital. The difference between normal and abnormal is razor thin. Life could be sucked out in seconds, whether the sucker is Tsunami with its epicenter in a foreign land thousands of kilometers away; or gun totting militants with their manufacturing units in a neighbouring country at a walk able distance. Both are adept in perishing precious lives instantaneously. Or is it that our lives are not that precious ? Precious things should not be perishing without notice!

The temperature of normalcy was derisively different in different parts of Chennai on the evening of the fateful day. On the east, the thirteen kilometer long Marina Beach, the second largest in the world, had turned into a water grave for thousands. But the hundreds in the Spenser Plaza, magnificently sitting at the heart of the town, were not remotely 'concerned'. Death and destruction was at two crows' flight, but life in this new Plaza was doing its full rounds.

Local morning paper had a two fold pain in store. One was the ever increasing statistics of Tsunami victims and the other was interview of a reporter with a group of students visitng Spencer Plaza, last evening. One of the students claiming to have come out to chill was telling the reporter, 'Tsunami is right in a way, as such accidents help in reducing the exploding population of our country'. His peer has yelled, 'Yes, he is right!' said the report. My morning cup of tea had gone cold in my hands at this cold pragmatism of our youth.

Lesson One; the whole world was supporting us on the Tsunami perish; but our values had a leak. In India, lives are prone to perish through calamities and values through pseudo modernism. World could provide succour to the victims of a Tsunami; but not to the failing values of a society where right and wrong are not scripted appropriately or with conviction.

Beach Road could be plied on, by next noon. The Madras University, Madras High Court, Tamil Nadu Civil Secretariat; besides Police Headquarters and Vivekananda House; all appeared to be gazing in melancholy at the devastated beach. Popular amongst lovers, walkers, visitors, players; the Marina Beach now was closed for all. As the Police and the Army could be spotted undertaking post havoc cleaning operations; crows and vultures were perpetually hovering in the desolate sky. Death had visited this famous. Tourist spot previous morning only. Had our landing in Chennai got advanced by a couple of hours, we could have been one of the visitors and thus amongst the victims. But that was not to be! A Providential Narrow Escape for us Two Indeed! I was only one of the several hundreds standing across the rails near Anna Square, watching the wreckage on the Beach. Fishermen houses, decorated market, long chain of big and small eateries, improvised cricket fields could be seen nowhere. They all had disappeared suddenly in a flash. Our eyes were pecking at tell tales of havoc spread across vast flats of sand. I prayed mutely for the peace of departed souls; shivering in my legs on the ferociousness of the now calm looking sea. The sea which I had come to swim in, after getting fed up by the sight of ever unyielding mountain chains of my State!

Little away, a heap of Tsunami affected people were huddled on the footpath by a couple of baton wielding cops. Two relief vans screeched to halt. The heap of the people pushed their way through batons with outstretched hands. Each one desired and strived to over reach. The cops started swinging their batons left and right, aimlessly. Governors and givers are as indisciplined as the governed and receivers. Be it life or death, fun or tragedy; chaos appears to be our culture.

Lesson Two. Whether it is Chamoli or Chennai, Latur or Leh; good governance and order is simply not in fashion with us. We are tragically indisciplined even in tragedies. World can provide us relief, but could not put an organized distribution mechanism in place for us. That we will have to do ourselves! Tsunami relief measures in Tamil Nadu couldn't fare better than such measures in Bhuj or Baramullah. We certainly are not in the habit of learning from our experiences of mistakes. Do go to Leh, before contradicting me on this count.

The figures in respect of human loss and that of property were increasing by each day. The tragedy was sitting heavy on my bossom. The stench of river Coovum was not something my hills' fresh air inhaling nostrils could adjust to. I decided to leave the coast and shift our itinerary deep into the mainland. Our visit to Tamilian cultural capital Madurai was greatly rewarding and immense relief. Pestering guides at Meenakshi Temple were no different from pandas of Haridwar and had to be warded off. The capital city of the great Pandya Kings is also rich in bag holding street salesmen, selling Madurai sarees in doubles and triplets. Overcharging by these sellers and protracted haggling by the prospective buyers served as reminder of Delhi's Chandni Chowk or Srinagar's Lal Chok! My faith in the traditional culture of this holy city was, however, kept intact by two Spartans who took us in and around Meenakshi Temple for pretty two hours. Every sacred nook and corner of this huge temple complex was explained to us with religious fervour. Standing at the particular point near a pillar and setting your eyes at a particular angle; one could, through a roof hole, see the golden top of the Temple shining bright like a humane religion. These learned Spartans, one of them a software engineer, were, however, not sure whether Kashmir is in India or Pakistan. In return to their two hours free guidance, I too put them to an hour long free discourse on Kashmir, Jammu and Vaishno Mata. They appeared just thrilled on entering new domains of information. I felt satisfied and relieved to play a quid pro quo! At Thirupparan Kundram temple, an old man provided very rich information for very poor fees. Pujas in South temples are softer on your purse than in the North.

However, a lesson on cheating was also awaiting us in the evening. Our Chennai hotel desk had charged us a good extra amount for confirmed train booking from Madurai to Bangalore. The Mysore Express, however, refused us a berth as our names were still at 20 and 21 of the waiting list.

Lesson Three. Be it North or South, the booking agents are not dissimilar in their commission swindling tactics. They may not know your language, but they are apt at selling unconfirmed tickets through confirmed promises. No foreign education could change them; foreigners are more on their hit list.

A young Tamil lady from Kanyakumari occupied a seat next to my wife's at Viluppuram while we were travelling by MS Guruvayur. In her broken Hindi, she asked my spouse, 'Aap Kahan se aa raha hain?' I was amused with the exotic accent and the amount of labour involved in her address. It was just like the speech of a visitor hailing from some alien part of the world. Women are fond of talking. That I found soon. Through a dressed Hindi and compressed English, the two ladies from farthest northern and southern ends of this great country were chatting like old chums. I witnessed my wife laughing aloud for the first time in the last three days. Moving further off the coast was unconsciously diluting our Tsunami grief. The Tamil woman had some knowledge of Kashmir and Kashmiri and when I painfully explained to her about our belonging to the other region of Jammu & Kashmir and about Dogras and Dogri, her eyes dilated in astonishment.

A language I have never heard of, she giggled without any trace of discomfiture. I had no reason to share her amusement. My grim countenance, however, sobered her promptly. 'Please tell me about Dogras and Dogri', she said apologetically. I told her, whatever there was to tell, with delight. It was almost this time of the year 2003 that we were celebrating our Dogri's enlistment in the 8th schedule of the Constitution of India. Why an educated and smart young woman should not have heard of scheduled language, even if it is spoken in a far off region? But then ignorance has not necessarily to breed in the helmets of Siwaliks only; it could get reared in the literate Deccan as well.

For most of us up in the North, all southerns or southies or Madrasi or Tamilian. Our inadequate knowledge of South India could hurt those who are Telugu, Malayali or Kannad. As a Dogra, I too was hurt to find this lady not knowing my language. Not knowing about a thing or two is common. What hurts is that some times people bear their ignorance up their sleeves and feel proud about it.

Lesson Five. Ignorance and illiteracy of information could be universal. Not that southies are rich in Education and northies in Moohal only. Knowledge belongs to one who desires and perspires to acquire it. It has no place for colour, caste, creed or region. Even a Dogri poet could be writing charming pieces in English!

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11

Of Age and Money

I am an avid reader of books on life engineering and literature. As a consequence thereof, I have the temerity to believe that my mental corridors are wide enough to carry a fairly high traffic of queries and questions. The audacious fact of the matter is that I may be a little conceited, as I love to wear my knowledge on my sleeves. Inviting questions come to me as naturally as air to your nasal canals. Conceiving, conjuring and coining answers is my passion and offering them unabashedly, rather exhibitingly; my practice. But there is a method in my madness. I am averse to all personal questions. Amongst them the two which otherwise are ordinary and unobtrusive and innocent, have been angering me the most. The difference between the two is that one of these looked merciless when I was in job and the other appeared very callous afterwards. The two are not related, but do possess a commonality of sorts, so some fatuous figures are the answer for both queries.

Well, well; let me avoid shooting at the breeze or tilting at windmills and directly make peace with your curiosity. The first one had been, 'How much salary do you get?' The second one; 'What is your age?' Now, tell me are these not the most impish, impertinent and impassable of the questions ever asked ? Mercifully, the uncouth ones who persist in such asking are dwindling by day. The left lot, however, appear to relish if the answer to the first question is uncannily thin and to the second, reasonably fat. For one like me who had been poor in purse and is now growing rich in age, these two simple questions are not only mischievous but also not worth their salt. I have never taken kindly to these two.

Having cultivated riches in my heart and youthful creativity in my mind, money or age are two things which I don't bother to count. In respect of money, my faith lies in R.W. Emerson who believes that without the rich heart, wealth is an ugly beggar. Regarding age, I believe Mark Twain. He said, 'Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it does not matter'.

Fortunately, the levels of money and age are undergoing perpetual transformation, taking the sting out of these questions. Both are happily being subjected to widely different interpretations these days. For Planning Commission of India, a daily spending around twenty nine rupees can earn you a tag of being 'rich'. This official report, not withstanding, many a metro dweller with their earnings twelve times over Planning Commission figure, find it not easy enough to make both ends meet. And then, there are those who rue their poverty for not being able to support an 'Armani' or sling down their shoulder, a Gucci bag. This is a country where a Whooping one third do not even reach the arbitrary and unimaginable level fixed by the Planning Commission.

The subject of Age is even getting trickier. Sixty, they say, is now new forty. Rahul Gandhi with his forty plus has given a new meaning to youth and age. Where as right attitude and control on psychological age is sprucing up some, power yoga is playing the trick for others. Quite a few, especially the fair sex species, are getting their biological age reversed through the Scissor of the Surgeon. Yet, a lot many in India are still jumping age. Time compels these hapless souls to squeeze their childhood or youth and quickly catapult to middle age. For them twenty is the new forty. But forty or around is not only relevant because of Rahul, Salmaan or these youth jumpers mentioned above. It has also been researched and reported to be the happiest period for a fairly large population of working men and women. A stage when struggle starts to bear fruit and stability is just around the corner. This stage has also been reported to be, generally, the best for two institutions called Marriage and Family.

Contrary to this, a new study has, however, maintained that happiness and depression follow a U-Shape curve over the person's life time; with the happiest time being at the start and end of the life. According to the lead researcher of this new study group, Prof. Andrew Oswald of the University of Warwick, USA; people have been found to be happier at twenty and seventy. There are others too, who talk of middle age blues or mid-life crisis. But I reject this out rightly in our context. This could be true of USA and UK where marriage and family are not really being respected and revered. In our context where a twenty year old is, more often than not, a struggler vying to prepare and plan his financial health and a seventy year oldie virtually being busy with his doctor; this theory of U-Shaped happiness does not yell well. Here, where we wear our financial and social trappings with a method, forty plus is the stage when one is free from the earlier slogging and later responsibilities.

I love to remain forty plus for another interesting reason. It goes that when Abrahim Linclon, the USA President, was forming his government; somebody suggested a name to be included in his cabinet. Linclon said, 'I do not like the face of that man.' The fellow who was recommending pressed further and said, "That fellow is competent, you must take him, Mr. President. And in any case, he is not responsible for his face which was given to him by his parents. 'Linclon replied, 'After forty, everyone is himself responsible for his face'.

My dear readers, I have, like many of you, made my face with honest labour and dignified perseverance and support it well till date. So, I would love to hang on to the Linclon's 'after forty'. This is my permanent answer to that obnoxious question of Age. As for income, with rupees twenty-nine per day being the cut-off, I need not feel humble before that old first question as well. They were curious to know my salary. Well, I am rich, I say; as I get well above rupees twenty nine a day. What old Abrahim did for me on the issue of 'Age', Montek Singh Has done for my 'Money'. I am grateful to both the gentlemen and am now willing to take personal questions, as well.

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12

Why Do You Come to School?

I was, I think, in class seven of my village school; when one day we pupils were suddenly put to inspection. Surprised, as I was, to see the fat gentleman with receding hairline and a quirky necktie; he had suddenly barged into our classroom, uninvited, unannounced, unscheduled and without introduction. Even when he made an unceremonious entry, he almost pounced at our teacher with deliberate impoliteness.

The lanky bespectacled teacher of ours, caught in the middle of his nap, bounced out of his chair like a rubber ball and had to hold himself back, so as to keep the bounce under control. But the intruder was beyond control. He went on petulantly with his speech – which was immodest in texture and noisy in temper. By that time, our headmaster too had arrived at the scene. His standing in attendance and our teacher's taking the cuss stoically, was enough to indicate the hierarchical status of the shouting gentleman. He was the chief inspector and had gone bananas to find our classroom teacher enjoying his siesta. And then, this inspector abruptly turned his torso to the right. He now was looking into the eyes of the class. Slowly his anger dissolved and gave way to a countenance which was at once compassionate and childlike.

'Why do you come to school?' he asked in a tone which was directly in contrast to the one used before. But the question was completely new to us; even when it was asked with an endearing empathy. We had no clue to the answer. We sat there in silence. I tried to conjure up a few replies, but rejected them even before their coming into being.

The inspector asked his question again. No hand in the class was raised. He purposely let the liquid of his eyes (they had turned almost fatherly by now) flow into that of ours and exhorted us to say something. Not a word from the entire class! He looked defeated and left the class room in agitation. His exit was no different from his entrance, but his question was unusual and uncommon. 'Why do we go to school?' It was such an innocuous enquiry. None of us, including our teachers, had ever bothered to explore the possibilities of such a query and the range and scope of the answers available thereto.

The Inspecting Officer left the school, but his question did not! For many years, as it happened, this innocent question was debated and discussed in the school programmes. The idea was, perhaps, to find out as many answers as possible. And there, indeed were many; but none in my eyes was original. Those were the days when the lessons were religiously learnt by rote and debates won on the strength of mugged texts; generally prepared by teachers of opposite camps, to outsmart each other. All answers were either right or wrong; correct or incorrect. Solutions, propositions or conclusions too, were weighed on predetermined scale. Terms like 'original', 'creative' or 'ingenious' were considered controversial and purposely avoided.

My college education weaned me away from my school time enthusiasm. And thus, a question of immense importance got lost some where in between. Issues relating to friends, love, life, family, society, culture, language and literature; came to be occupying a place of prominence; pushing several childhood issues into the dustbin of time.

As riding on the band-wagon of government jobs is considered respectable and secure, I too catapulted to one and somehow could secure a comfortable and cozy seat. During the course of this journey, or rather towards the end of it; I came to be inspecting classes myself. It was at this juncture that the old question of 'why to go to school?' revisited me. Now, I began to throw this question into the classrooms and encouraged the students to come out with on spot replies. I was happy to see the answers were not only quick and spontaneous, but were also varied and viable. I, however, was waiting for some sparkling and touching reply.

It did come. And again, from a remote village school! The student of class seven expressed shyly but fluently in a language which was not the medium of his instruction. Obviously, he was not comfortable with the medium, but when encouraged to speak in his mother tongue, it came out that he was not uncomfortable with the matter of his reply. He said, Sir, I came to school to commune. One may get the warmth of words through personal tutoring, but the warmth of the herd lies in herding alone.

School is a Society. The skills acquired here are, at once, collective and competitive; taught in an inclusive culture. A carpenter learning his carpentry in exclusivity tends to get self conceited, vane and self possessive. He is like those traditional Hakims who die, uneasily, bearing the burden of their unshared knowledge and expertise of their pious profession. A School knows what sharing is and, there fore, is the best institution in the world. It may be hard to ascribe such a sparkle of wisdom to a rural backward lad of 13 to 14. But believe me; the body of the above reply is almost original. I have just put in some communicability into it.

Life, after all, is like a school; only not as institutionalized. So when in school, remember to be in 'commune' and enjoy the 'herd'. And once out in life; follow Jim Rohn in his saying, 'Life asks us to make measurable progress in reasonable time. That is why they make fourth standard chairs (desks) so small, so you would not fit in them at age 25'.

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13

Of Heart, Feet and Me

My heart and feet have never been friendly to each other except when they are happily hopping between the beer bars or chasing babes. These pursuits necessarily need a walk from pavement to pavement. My feet are passionate about their application on the gravels. And the heart about its explorations! Other than this, they only reconcile to each other (barely in a kamchalao manner) at my long morning walk track. A bridle path with godly fresh and grass green trees, mercifully, stand saved on one hill shoulder of the exit road of my town. My Heart and Feet, however, don't trundle and track with a similar mission.

The heart has many ambitions; one of them is to romanticize and fanaticize in the company of small and big trees. It once gingerly confided into me that that smaller ones are the dreaming damsels and those with the bulging trunks are busty buxoms.

My feet, however, have only one passion to care for. To practice various forms of walking and running! The heart and feet share the excitement of visiting places, but they have their own takes on travel modes. That is where me and my body get agonized by the rivalry these two bear to each other. The heart reflects its anger through abnormally fast beats and the feet register anguish by kicking their toes and heels. They are awesome! But I love them – they are my parts. Howsoever fighty they may be, they ultimately get fixed by me. I can't say the same for my children and their mother.

When I decided to visit Jaipur last December, my feet dished out its foolish proposal. 'Why not walk to the destination and have the pleasure of foot crossing those braces (straps) built between the banks of the Tawi, Ravi, Satluj and Beas and may be

Jamuna too, but I am not sure for that one.' 'My dear, I want to visit the Pink City for sightseeing. And a super marathon is no way to simple plain tourist visit.' I curtly advised my feet. 'Okay then, let it be on the back of a horse!' the pair said with some trepidation. And then to boost their confidence, added, 'Wow! How rakish you would look mounting a white stallion! They were viusalizing the healthy ribs of a mount and their jolly jabs into them. 'You fool-hardy, I am not from the Royalty – I can't afford a horse. Besides, unlike the ever increasing production of new cars, The horses now are in short supply.'

There was a total silence in my drawing room where this court was being held. The Feet looked sullen and the Heart indifferent. That morning the Heart had breakfasted with the Brain and rubbed into wisdom for a while. It knew that Jaipur – on – foot was a foolish cry. The poor Feet would certainly not succeed in their wish to keep their application intact. On any other occasion, the Heart would have danced with pleasure. But not today! It had promised the Brain, this morning, to observe complete restraint for the day.

The Feet fluttered on the carpeted floor and the noise was like heavy foot- fall on a gravel ground. 'Eureka!' cried that set of feet. 'Yes, the cheapest and the best mode of reaching destinations. Bicycle!' They looked triumphantly around and shouted aloud, 'The four lane road from Jammu to Jaipur is ideal for pedaling down the distance. Go, get a sports bicycle with pedals of our size and we will show you and this lazy Heart what wonders feet can play even without touching an inch of the earth.' Their excitement was contagious. But I didn't allow myself to take the bug. My reply was slow and spaced, but deliberate. It had also a ring of finality. 'Enough of this wordy hopscotch! A train ticket costs a few hundreds against a sports cycle which starts at fifteen thousand and could run to a couple of lakhs.' The atmosphere in the room was stiff and gagged.

The liquid silence of the room was rippled with the buzzer of the gate bell. It was my travel agent. The ticket had arrived. The Feet wished to depart in protest, but that was not to be. The time of the argument and delivery of the train ticket had been in consonance. It was 18th of December. The departure was on 20th. I knew I had to go through a couple of errands before that. And the chores of packing! But what was taxing my mind most was how to wash the petulance off my feet. Half an hour later, all the gibberish of heart and feet was of no consequence. A cloud burst of sorts had taken place. And you know, the smaller noises give away before the bigger ones. A severe pain will give you a feeling that the lighter one has evaporated.

As I fished out the train ticket to absorb full details of the document in the glowing light of a table lamp, I felt bamboozled. The ticket was for two. My spouse had chosen to accompany and without bothering to inform the companion. It was always like that with her. She would choose to do things directly and rather secretively. She would deal with the ticket agent too in her own way. Her method of handling men and matters was so exclusive that it could qualify for a patent. But this was a plain pain for me. Handling the pain of spat between the Feet and the Heart on their petty ping pong arguments was as easier, in comparison, as applying a puff on your face. My dream of sitting alone and in silence under the tomb of Sheesh Mahal in the Amber Palace would never be. My spouse and silence had never been friends. The anticipated excitement of way faring like a lone lunatic with the Feet and the Heart in conversation through the vast gardens of the pink city or a silent mount of the Hawa Mahal were raised to the ground in a jiffy. But the train travel had other excitements in store for three of us – Me, my Feet and my Heart.

The railway station clock just struck eleven. I am deboarding the Pooja Express at Jaipur Railway Station. To my amusement and delight, my Feet and Heart both are upbeat. They have enjoyed the thirteen hour journey and the company in the compartment. The feet had all along been playing with two kids of four and six. The pair of my feet and the pair of kids belonging to that scantily clad alpha mother, had struck a wonderful chord. My feet even confessed to me later, 'Walking is not the only pleasure we are meant for. Joy has many ways and all of them should be celebrated.' The heart had travelled its full circle. Fantasticising between woods is bland before a lovely lady of flesh and blood with juicy lips and jasmine odour. And it confided, 'Woods can't be women. Don't you ever take me to those jungles ? Take me to these lovely babes. A couple or two of them have more oxygen than the entire hill-shoulder of your morning walk track'.

My exhilaration too was clearly inscribed on my face. Long flirtatious talks' of the previous night were cheerily sitting on my mane. I had even done some serenading with, my poems, on the request of that exquisite lady. The train has left for its final destination. The windows of AC compartments are stubbornly opaque. I can't see the raised good bye hand of my lady of the journey. My hand, however, is still waving to the departing train. It is then that a harsh tug puts my raised hand down. It is my wife. 'The Pooja is gone and along with it goes your Pooja. Her destination is Ajmer where Ajmer is waiting for his family. And by the way, his full name is Major Ajmer Singh Jamwal'. My wife is speaking in her streamy and running voice.

I looked at my wife sheepishly. She gives a wry look and says, 'Her name is Vasundhra and I had taught her psychology in her B.A. final. She is undertaking her Ph.D. on some topic relating to Sensuality Quotient of Men and Women'.

My face fell. 'So that is why my wife was deliberately looking the other way and keeping her ever moving lips locked all along the journey.' A flash of anger hit me in the forehead. The two women had connived to make a guinea pig of me! A subject matter of research! My God!! And I thought I was out for some fun behind the back of my wife. My Jaipur visit was almost a wash out. But this event saved my morning walks of my home town. My Heart has agreed with me to remain happy with the woods and forget about damsels and buxoms. My Feet, however, have the last laugh. They still believe that 'Joy has many ways'. In the long run, the grounded ones have always been nearer to happiness. My belief lies more in my new maxim, 'Women have many ways'. My Heart has further improvised on this : 'A woman has many ways of fixing a man and his heart'.

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14

Taj Mahal *mera hai!*

It started with a joke. The property dealer, I approached for purchasing a modest house in the suburbs of my town was irritatingly talkative. He was an uncouth, daintly dressed middle ager, with bracelet led wrists and diamond studded fingers. He was a man in perpetual hurry, speaking with an affected flourish and a nasaled voice. His method of convincing his clients was rakish and wayward. "Take me for my word, Sir," he said thumping his desk top, "I can get you, anything in the world. Getting a house is no problem at all, should you think of purchasing Taj Mahal or Lal Qila. I can fix up a deal for that too" and he laughed aloud with a vivacious guffaw ... Expert dealer he may have been, my twenty minutes talk with him was enough to exhibit his one sided, conversational skills. But even this bloating boaster knew his limitations. He knew that his reference to fixing up a Taj Mahal for his clientele was only a figurative hyperbole. No brain bearing customer would take the cliche literally.

To the utter disbelief and dismay of my property dealer, the Great Taj Mahal is being actually claimed. In a bid of claims and counter claims this moon-stuck, dreamy monument is being pushed to the status of mere property. The zealots, however, are not bringing in the property dealers to fix the deal for them. They are taking recourse to history and religion. Each claimant is sure of his facts. "Taj Mahal should be a Walk property ... as this is a grave and all graves are property of Wakfs and are managed by them". The statement comes from a minority community, leader and an acknowledged trouble shooter. A Minister in a state Government, it stands to be clarified whether this is a personal view of the

Minister or his Govt's Stand. "Taj Mahal is actually Tajo Mai Mai Mahal built by a Hindu King". Thunders belligerent leader of majority Community. He has the expertise of licking a controversy to its bare bones," It must be handed over to us". Who does this us mean is any body's guess. A semi political, semi religious organizations Supremo provides his support to this new found issue and demands carbon dating of the 17th Century monument," to ascertain the truth. And the Taj's sole proprietor, the ASI, heretofore, is bewildered, ready to fumble and fret.

I have no love for the likes of those theorists who call Taj a grave or a Smadhi, have also no space for those who are out to put Taj-love-tale to shreds. Neither ASI nor carbon-dating is my worry, My worry is that lately, the world known Taj is getting into news for wrong reasons.

Be it the news of Taj corridor or a Mantri's controversial claims; Be it the apprehension of its tilting on one side or of air pollution effecting it adversely, or a dig at the more recent love story behind its creation all are anti-Taj Mahal. But I am pro Taj, like millions and millions of people world over. I and them believe in Taj Mahal. To me and them, its physical being and the vital statistics is more important than graves inside. Whether it is Tajo Mai or Mumtaz Mahal resting inside is a basis, incredibly ridiculous to lay claims on. Even fools should shun from staking claims on a monument which belong to the world as its eighth wonder. Why some of our politicians fail to compare favourably even with a common property dealer ? My property dealer, the fool of King Lear was fully conscious of his jestings, The politicians of the above class are not. My dandy friend could not fix a house for me. Would he fix up the politicians venturing to deal in the world properties ? He should ! So that his profession does not get maligned. Property dealers of the world unite, your business is taking on dangerous connotations in the hands of some self serving politicians.

So should also unite the lovers of the world. The hate mongers are out to kill love stories and the horror of the horrors is that they want to kill these with a communal flavour. Today world is not bothered as to who created Taj Mahal or for whom he did so. They lovers only come to see this great white, monumental architect of 17th century India, people all over come over to Agra to enjoy see the beauty of this building-a fairly large number of them care a fig whether it is Mumtaz who is housed inside or a Tajo Mai. Taj Mahal na Meera Hai na Teera hai, this white moon of marble belongs to all those who have an eye for beauty. God save it from 'Buri Nazar'.

And then there are those whats App – crazy people who provide you unsolicited information ranging on issue from God to Dog or from Romeo Juliet to Mumtaz Mahal. Bear with this crude post about the love of Taj Mahal creator. It goes as under "We know Taj Mahal as a symbol of love, but never known facts are :-

(1) Mumtaz was Shahjahan's 4th wife out of his 7 wives (Great).

(2) Shahjahan killed Mumtaz's husband to marry her (excellent).

(3) Mumtaz died during her 14th delivery (wow).

(4) After her death Shahjahan married Mumtaz's sister (Amazing).

Where the hell was love"

My humble reply to all such message senders is that a monument with a lovely tale is more fascinating than the one which wears a horror story. For God's sake do not spoil the romance and glamour of the tale of Taj Mahal – It would be as singular as the sin of spoiling the structure or claiming its ownership.

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15

What is There in a Name?

The name given to me by my parents was not to my liking. And it was so from that conscious age when one grows cerebral enough to put men, matters and materials on his personal reckoning scale. In your childhood, as the psychologists will put it, you have a strange propensity towards things: uncommon, uncanny and uncompromising. For children are not children if they stay hooked to a single pleasure game. Yet, all of them may not be as curious or eager as to cry for the moon. There are only few who would discard their multicoloured balls in disgust and insist on having the shining moon as their play thing. Well, I was one of these few.

Mystified by the big blue arch over the earth, I would yearn and long for the sky and to be part of it. Earth for me was not important. It was the romance of an innocent child who was to learn much later that the earth was for real and not the sky. As this romance grew, my hatred for the name by which I was known also multiplied. And finally, I decided to change my name. My father agreed, reluctantly; but my form teacher did not. It was here that I was introduced to my Shakespeare and his famous quote on names. "What is there in a name, a rose will be a rose, even when called by some other name", read out my teacher, so theatrically that I was simply floored and the operation, name-change was cancelled.

As I started jumping grades in the school, my romance for the sky gave way to new pursuits. By the time I reached final year of my high school. I had almost forgotten the sky, the stars and the moon. Now, I had fallen in love with a girl. And she was no fool. She knew the value of the mother earth and respected it. I too, started respecting the earth. But my earthly name could not attract my adulation. Moreso, because by now, I had seen through Shakespeare's trickery. His take on the insignificance of the names was with reference to a rose. And now at fifteen, I knew that I was no rose. My name-hater tree began to bear flowers again. The drab, dull name was certainly not acceptable to me. I put in an application to the headmaster for the change of my name. To my dismay, I was told, The State School Board has already registered the name as it was and now no change can be effected by the school'.

'Well, Sir; who can effect the change ?' I asked nimbly.

'The Chairman of the Board of School Education,' I was told.

The said authority was beyond my comprehension. I meekly went on with the name I was baptized with. But when I went to college. I found that my orthodox urchin name was a plain shame in that urban world. I had watched with misery, phony lads of my school, bearing pretty names. They were morosely sloppy in their speech and boorish in their bearing, but the name tags they carried were either mythological enough to inspire awe and respect or modern enough to invite envy. There, however, existed a strange poetic justice in that world of my village – school name – game. Most of the beautifully named 'blue boys' were not living up to their names – neither physically nor in important life behaviour skills. So an Arjun would be lean cowardly fellow and a Krishna devoid of all childhood charms. Neither a Kailash would reflect any signs of a Himalayan personality nor an Abinash would evince any trait of indestructibility. But it was not so in college. By a strange sequence of situations and styles, most of the pretty – name bearing young fellows; here, succeeded to match the grace of their names. So, a Bhuvanpati, here carried the holy visage of Pitaparmeshwar and a Harry nursed the spirit and heart of a hare

– challenges here were many more in comparison to my village school. And the greatest of them was that, this college was a co-educational institution in comparison to my all boys' school. My name, therefore, was evidently absurd and ordinary in this world of iconic fashion and Jane Austin's fiction. As my name had no worthwhile expansion, my chest had refused to expand, my head too, was vowing willingly to all those ridicules which came my way on account of rustic name. Strangely, however, a good number of my fellow students concentrated on me than my name. My finely chiseled physique would impress upon them the need of ignoring the 'Tag' and watch the product. But those who believed in ridiculing man because of his name where many more. For them rustic name was like a scarlet letter on the face of the bearer of that name and thus a permanent curse. It was much later that I came to know that this great game of name and shame has always been a favourite. Persons and places with queer names have generated laughter, since, ages.

All those responsible for my 'namkaran' were then, (during my college days) my avowed enemies. My parents have been my biggest culprit. After all, they were primarily responsible for saddling me with a 'name-shame'. Then two things happened, almost simultaneously, some more aberrant names came to surface an the target of bullies shifted – this was a great relief. Second relief came, when I was declared most handsome amongst the fresher's. I scored first rank in the class. As my self-respect quotient and confidence quotient looked north, I did not thank my stars. I instead thanked my parents who had given me the appropriate genes. I was relieved to realize that whereas names may have some possibilities of a change, the genes don't have, and inheriting good genes is better than getting a smart name.

A new confidence put new scheme of things into my brain. I began to concentrate more on my conversational skills. I also took tips to support my gear with elegance and allowed my slow-stop walk to give way to lusty and long strides. My talk and walk had now grown to highly acceptable standards. But my name had not. In all new introductions, debates and discussions, my name was my sore point. Then a friendly advice changed my world. I simply condensed my first and second name into abbreviations and tagged those initials with my sir-name. Lo and behold, it turned out to be beautiful and very modern. This was further supplemented with a pen-name, as my poetry was getting now duly applauded by the boys and girls of the college. So I was happily bearing three names and used each of them as per the requirement of the people and the place; my original however kept pursuing me with the tenacity of a jilted lover. In time, when I came to gain a place in civil services, my sir-name and the abbreviated one, flourished and overgrew its original both in strength and space. And with recognition of my poetic-skills, the nom-de-plume came to get popular with literary friends and fans. As the two new names were gaining currency I was happily basking under their sun-shine.

My newly acquired addresses in the realm of names were both very impressive and each was a print of its own. The one with initials sounded administratively correct and befitting for a civil servant; the one used to write poetry was soft and romantic. But shortly a new challenge appeared to surface in the office circles. Most of my seniors would invariably like to know my first name. They said "The practice of calling your juniors by their first name allows one to exercise both the authority and affection of a family head". Slowly I began to realizes that first name can't be actually compressed into a single alphatical letter. And some bosses were mischievously imaginative and would expand a DK, a PK or a TK into much more lampooning expansions than their originals; thus throwing your caution of hiding your unpleasant original to many more ridiculous possibilities. And amongst team mates, I assessed that a cold sir name or naked initials failed, to bring that warmth of mutual belonging which a first name often does.

My nom-de-plums came out to play even naughtier games, at certain occasions. Many a time when my name would be announced for recitation, in a poetic symposium or festival, the audience evidently expected a female poet with a cuckoo voice to grace the pulpit. They would be apparently disappointed to find a male poet disguised under an effeminate pen-name. In such poetic meets I would fail to attract appreciation despite reciting best of my verses in my sonorous voice and poetic style. We all have experience that perceptions can make or break a speaker. I know that my pen-name has a female disposition and thus, could deceive, I would not forget long – past incident told by my friend while under going Army officers training in OTS Madras (now Chennai). Once, when a letter with my pen name, written below R.S.V.P. reached his quarters, he was out in a game-field, seven kms away. His roommate received the letter and excitedly rushed on a bicycle to deliver the same to his friend. The fellow officer of my friend had thought that the sender must be the girl friend of his room-mate and so decided that the letter must reach the lover-boy at once. To this day I can imagine the disappointment caused to that man by a deceptive name.

The final wisdom, however, would dawn on me much later when I would return home like a prodigal son and proudly wear the name which I hated once. But that would be when complexities of an abbreviated name would create real-life problems and an effeminate nom-de-plume tends to generate gender problems. My desire to revisit my old good name was not only a matter of nostalgia. From pension office to Aadhar card; from passport office to house land registers, everyone wanted my name in full as if, my abbreviated name did not belong to me. If full names like filled stomachs are really important, why allow at all those abbreviated names which don't possess the flab of a full stomach or the flush of a healthy face but do know that wisdom lies in brevity. It took me long to know, but the knowing did take place. It was time to turn full circle. Reverting to the old original name was almost a necessity. Deep down my love for the old was also growing. I had been bull shitting the maxim like old is gold; but now a new found love was growing for the old. Old may not be gold but as you begin growing old; you begin to romanticize the past. One even begins to believe the old dogri saying that the taste of an 'Aamla' is like the wise-crack of an oldie. These both taste well but the taste is not instantatious. It was almost at this time when I read and loved a wise quote. "All old men live in their past and all youngmen live in their future; they both miss the present". Was I missing the present merely for a name? And them a Russian joke about a name made me decide as to which name I would finally adopt. A guide at the state Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg was interviewing an old man who had lived all his life in Russia's second largest city :

"Where were you born ?"

"St. Peterburg!"

"Where did you study?"

"Petrograd!"

"Where did you work?"

"Leningrad!"

"Where will you live when you retire?"

"St. Pertersburg!"

Like my name cycle, the name of Russian city St. Peterburg was changed to Petrograd first and them to Leningrad. But finally the original name St. Petersburg was restored. In due course I would be restoring my original name as entered in my school admission register.

My name change process had no political motives. It was, therefore, easy for me to revisit my old name. I was growing in agreement to Shakespear. After all what is there in a name? But for our politicians there is plenty in it. For instance, names of roads or cities in our countries might come with the baggage of colonial association and need to be changed so as to put things in perspective, So Bombay- with its Portugues connection, as it was given as dowry to the British when Charless II married Cathernine of Braganza had its name changed to Mumbai, reportedly in the name of a local diety called Mumbai Devi. Also Calcutta, Madras, Orissa, Banglore and many others came to be known by their names for reasons attributed to language, culture or patriotism.

Even the port of Vasco da Gama, named after the Portuguese navigator and explorer who landed in the Western Coast of India in the 15th century, is up for the name change game.

However, while cities and towns can and do enjoy the privilege of having their names changed at political will, under duress from cultural activists, villages often find themselves stuck with appellations which are less than desirable. These names appear to be facing same procedural impediment, as once was faced by a village school boy and the fellow had to drop the very idea of name change. There are reportedly scores of villages in UP with less-than-Salybrious names which when translated into sanitized English, range from 'Rotten' to 'Posterior', from 'Excreta' to 'sister-fucker'. Re-baptising authorities refuse a name change on the grounds like Bandobasti-records or revenue entries since many many decades, their story is similar to mine, in my case it was a board-form. For insignificant Indian-villages, name-change is not easy as they have no patriotic reasons to offer. Renaming a place, village or town is the prerogative of the government and the villages and villagers have no ready access there.

Mercifully, however, the naming of a baby here is left to the wishes of parents. So we have names of children as varied as the name of a state (Kashmir Singh, Punjab Singh etc.) of a town (Multan Singh etc) of a river (Ganga, Jamna mal etc.) or it could be anything inciting embracement or reverence; a name drawn from Mythology or from a common pool. Such freedom is not available in certain countries. Some countries (numbering 12) like China, Denmark, France, US etc, are having naming laws. A naming law restricts the names the parents can legally give to their children. This restriction is usually used to protect the children from being given an offensive or embarrassing name. Eight countries have baby name law where the name of the baby could only be chosen from prescribed list of names prepared by the govt. Newzealand, Germany and a couple of other countries decided to ban egregiously awful names like Monkey and Pluto. So we can see that many advanced countries don't trust their citizens to name their babies. Denmark has strict law on personal to protect babies from having odd names to suit their parents fancy. A name has to be out of the listed 7000 names. Indian parents are given the freedom of naming their babies. It is a different story that quite a few of these babies later get exposed to the common Indian game of the name and shame.

Shakespeare believed that a rose would be a rose even if it is called by another name. Indian film industry of the fifties appeared to have no faith in shakespeare. They would ask their actors and actresses (read rose) to acquire such names which be acceptable to their larger viewers. Thus Dilip Kumar, Meena Kumari etc. became top stars under acquired names. It was pure marketing stunt which with passing time, thankfully, went out of fashion. The poor Bard of Avon had not seen the world we do see now or have been seeing since his time. Different religions different cultures different regions have their own specific set of names which are visibly exclusive and would easily give away identity of their wearers in respect of their religion in particular and in respect of their region in general.

What is there in a name? Everything that could be. Not pronouncing a name correctly could take away your job. A doordarshan broadcaster did flaunder on a VIP name and was unceremoniously checked out the same evening. It so happened that during visit of Chinese President XI jim peng, one news broadcaster mistook the first name of the vip i.e. XI and called him as president eleven jimping. Horrible ? Yes it is ! Not knowing a name correctly could bring you a bad name and render you unemployed. Naming places wrongly could also cause commotion. More when it happens in a politically sensitive Kashmir, Anantnag in Kashmir is called Islamabad by many who are residing in the valley. And recently quite a few have started calling Shankarcharya hill in Srinagar as Koh-e-suleman. And both these new names are generally resented by the nationalist as they see in these names a separatists-game-plan and communal mind set. But these new names are never used officially by the govt. Of J&K or govt. Of

India and agencies controlled by the govt. One local TV anchor who was reporting the sept 14 floods on Kashmir channel of doordarshan used the above two unofficial names and did this repeatedly. The reaction on the social media was deafening. The anchor in the case however, did not lose his job but was relegated to an "off-camera" assignment. Some names, you see, or not mere names. They have the potential to create trouble, hostilities, acrimony and even war. A part of Kashmir, stealthily annexed by Pakistan is named as Pakistan – occupied – Kashmir, by us. But Pakistan authorities have named it as "Azad Kashmir".

Names of some place or people, may not therefore behave as inert nouns. My six~~e~~th class English grammar where we would cry in chorus-the noun is the name of a person place or thing – appears to have changed in part. Since the times of Shakespeare or my best of times, name of certain places have adopted dangerous colours and connotations. They have developed the potential of converting in to a verb. Mumbai now can act and react if you call it Bombay. A set of jealots could beat you into a pulp if you call Mumbai by its colonial name.

As I peacefully acknowledge and own my original name, I realize that is not as mundane as I used to think it to be, infact no name is. Name should not be causing such commotions ! Like some countries, name not their lanes or roads, they simply assign them a number. Even men and women could have been only numbered and not named. Understanding our Shakespeare well would mean that it is the men and women of the world who matter, not their tags. Effort should be to improve the product without bothering about its wrapper. Humanity could lose its warmth when given packed. It shines in naked-ness and does not care for a name and when you are indifferent to something its relevance on the scale of good or bad, smart or ugly just runs out of existence. Almost!.

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16

Survival of the Book

Literary world in particular and the reading fraternity in general is acutely apprehensive about the future of the 'Book". With monitor usurping the position of the paper and the visual that of the word, the Book appears to be in danger indeed! Ready to be pushed to the margin!

Yet the world statistics belie the newly nursed fright about the impending demise of the Book. The new century in its first decade has produced more writers than ever and the readership has swollen like the sea in tempest.

But that is a phenomenon in the medium what is now called 'the world language'. This planet's accepted language for commerce, technology, knowledge and empowerment. That hundreds of mother tongues are already paying the price of the world getting global; is an issue left unsaid for the time being. For, despite my heartfelt agony for those shrinking languages, my subject today is the Book and not the language. And that the Book is going to survive and flourish; in spite of arrival of an entirely new modern generation which is religiously aversive to the screeching sound of the pen and paper and overtly obsessed with click of the mouse.

Even when the social networking is at the verge of exploding, the centuries-old system of postal service is very much in use. The Book lovers are finding new ways and means to take on the likes of Facebook and digital publications. One such method is Book Crossing, where a physical book travels across and also takes assistance from the same monitor which is feared to be killing the future of books.

Book Crossing has a simple idea. Share books with strangers if you can. Leave a book at a cafe, on the top of an ATM, the train station; anywhere – that someone might find it. That person reads the book and releases it into the 'wild' again, after letting you know where he found it and what he thought of it.

Before you release your book, log on to bookcrossing.com and register your book. The website gives you a book crossing ID number which you write inside the book along with a note explaining in brief the idea behind letting your book free. The finder then logs in, types in the ID number and gets a history of book's journey. Finally, the finder records his remarks and leaves the book at yet another public place to allow the voyage of the book on.

Book Crossing claims to be the world's largest library; with free referring, not to what the readers pay; but what the books do-run free.

Many in Indian conditions would not get convinced by this book crossing business. That the experiment may not work here; where a book collected from the top of an ATM could be 'imprisoned' instead of setting it 'free' after reading. Well, for all those cynics, the experience of the Missile Man of India should be convincing enough to establish the power of the Book.

A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the former President of India was delivering a lecture at the Indian International Centre, New Delhi on the 16th of February, 2011. The influence that the book wields is reflected in one of his narrations! He told his audience about his participation in the valedictory function of a book fair in Tamil Nadu and that how astonished he was to see a gathering of more than two lakh people; young and experienced, parents, teachers and leaders from various walks of life. 'When I saw the gathering of different generations', he said, 'I suggested the necessity of having home library and administered an oath to the audience which was taken with bubbling enthusiasm. And the oath was as under :

1. Today onwards, I will start a home library with 20 books and out of which 10 books will be children's book.
2. My daughter and son will enlarge this home library with 200 books.
3. My grand children will enlarge the great home library to 2000 books.
4. I consider our library a life long treasure.
5. We will along the family spend at least one hour at this home library each day.

The former President then comes to the core of this rejoice. He says, 'Immediately after the oath, thousands and thousands of people rushed to the book stalls and within an hour most of the book stalls were exhausted'.

What happened in that Book Fair in August 2009 in one State of India can happen in other States of India, as well! The value of a book is in our sanskar like the deep roots of a banyan tree and thus cannot be uprooted easily; not by modern gawks and geeks.

Great books are not only a store-house of great knowledge; they turn out to be great help to meet an emergency. Dr. Kalam's student life incident is a case in point. He was then studying in Madras Institute of Technology in his second year and had decided to stay back in the hostel during vacations to prepare for a subject. It was during one of those days that he received a trunk call from his brother-in-law, saying that Rameshwaram was severely hit by a cyclone and that his parents desired to see him immediately. But there was no money to negotiate the distance and no time to wait for the receipt of the fare amount of Rs.60.

The would-be Top Scientist had with him one rare possession in the form of a book. The book was The Theory of Elasticity costing Rs.400 in those times. In the absence of any alternative, this precious book was duly taken to Moore Market which was then the reasonable market for purchase and selling of old books. The bookseller, a pious Brahimn with a traditional tuft was told about the emergency and the necessity of selling the book for Rs.60. The bookseller took the book and opened it to read the first page. He could see that the book was gifted as the first prize to the student by the then Vice Chancellor of the Madras University. The saintly seller knew the true value of books. He refused to purchase such a precious piece, but took it as a pawn. Having met the emergency, a happy APJ Abdul Kalam retrieved the book later to his great relief.

Dr. Kalam narrates the incident with misty eyes and concludes, 'A book always gives knowledge, but at times it can also become wealth during an emergency'.

The Book, therefore can't die. The philosophical Paulo Coelho has sold more than 85 million books. The agent of mystical J.K. Rowling has stopped counting the volumes sold. The heart throb of young Indians, Chetan Bhagat has broken all previous records of Indian English book Market. Even the plain High School Grammar and Composition by Wren and Martin from the House of Chand & Co. has sold more than 10 million copies. The Arrows Books brought out 50th Anniversary Edition of Harper Lee's To kill a mocking bird in 2010. The book by then had already sold 30 million copies, and there are many more like that. However, the Bible is the largest selling book of the world, with Bhagvat Gita not behind. Book has an inherent capacity to create thirst.

This thirst is going to survive for centuries and so will the Book. So, My Friends! Don't idle away around an idiot-box or stay hooked for hours to the machine, promising the world. Pick up a good book and drink deep into the world of knowledge, power and morals. Yes, in between, strut you eyes for a while and smell the pages. The process will provide you a relief which other wise belongs to meditation only.

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17

Relationship Quotient of India and Pakistan

I am fond of reading newspapers. That is when I am not immersed in the middle of a good book or not fiddling with my pen and paper to write this or that. To the ones who feel aghast on my mention of a pen and paper in an era of paperless writing, it may be clarified that I am a 'writer of ancient 'class'. Belonging to the old clan of the pure; where writing a book would mean writing it with pen and paper and not with your fingers on the keyboard. Agreed that I am outdated in my mode of writing; but believe me, my access to new information and knowledge is not outdated.

It is middle of the year 2011 and laid before me are four sets of newspapers with four reports. Word 'Pakistan' is common in all these reports with its invariable Indian connection.

There is that 'Dawn' correspondent on the Pakistan of 'fifty years ago' ad lamenting the present status of his country, He writes, 'Going through all these newspapers, I am left with the impression of the Pakistan of the early 60s as a place with hope, its life stretching out before it, fresh and untarnished'. Trawling through Dawn's 1961 editions, the reporter joyfully digs out advertisements for dances, cabarets, acrobatic performances and balls; also dinner and drinks with live dance performances at the Beach Luxury. He rues – 'How alien they seem in the modem Pakistan landscape!'. Hater hardly finds a space in an atmosphere of fun, freedom and liberty. No doubt then that early 60s Karachi shared with Bombay (now Mumbai) that exotic oriental life spirit, as Lahore shared with Delhi. That ws before they schemed to export terrorism to

India and curtail their local liberties.

The other newspaper report is with Washington dateline. This is a survey conducted by the US based Pew Research Center. The relationship quotient of the Pakistanis with reference to Indians has shown a prominent dip. Every three in four Pakistanis have an unfavourable opinion of India. Up from fifty percent five years ago! Among the surveyed, 57% of Pakistanis believe India is a bigger threat than Let and Al Qaida. Very saddening statistics indeed!

Yet a Hindi newspaper with its Ambala dateline profusely lauds the fruitul efforts of Ansar Burnie, the human right activist of Pakistan who does not only help the release of Indian sailors from the clutches of Somalian pirates, but also becomes instrumental in according a Governor House reception for these Indians at Karachi. No doubt then that at New Delhi airport, the Indian children of these captives were shouting slogans like, 'Thank you Uncle Burnie, we love you!' Alas the, man was killed for wearing his 'Human-Heart' on ~~is~~ his tongue.

A report from my own town is informing me about a Faiz Poetry Festival being organized at New York. What makes my heart jump with joy is that our own Seema Anil Sehgal has been selected by the Pakistani sponsors of the programme to recite and sing Faiz's poetry in the States. As the husband of the singer proudly tells the press, 'Seema will be the lone Hindu performer in the cent percent Muslim affair'. Well, music and poetry, as they rightly say, has no religion and an artiste is glorified through his or her art, not religion.

I am also going through a news item; how Pakistani fishermen held for trespassing are expressing their thankfulness to India and Indians on their release. 'We have been treated extremely well by the Indians,' claim the now set free fisherman.

We have hundreds of such news items. Incidences, experiences, travel diaries, interactions which reveal that the poorly surveyed human relationship between Indians and Pakistanis cannot be actually so. Even when the Dawn reporter may be true in his comparison of the 'then' and 'now' Pakistan; the survey of Pew Research Center of USA can't be taken on its face value. A two round survey of little over three thousand people (only) could not only be skewed and sketchy, but dangerous as well.

Falsehood generates hopelessness the hopeless people tend to hate. And hope has not evaporated between the people of India and Pakistan. Between hope and despair, it is the hope which has the final laugh.

However, as the year 2011 collapses its wings to give way to 2012, my eyes are meeting another set of reports on Pakistan. These reports are not about people but their masters. The Government and the Army! The people are not bothered about the Memogate but Army is. It wishes to put its own Government in the dock. The Prime Minister and Chief of the Army Staff enter into a wordy duel. Even when the National Assembly passes a resolution about' the supremacy of the Parliament, the Army General holds his swagger stick high- an indirect reminder that Pakistan's Democracy is subservient to its Army. He has already chosen to submit an affidavit in the Supreme Court of Pakistan without bothering to consult his Government.

This I find in stark contrast to the Indian Army Chiefs writ petition (relating to his D.O.B. dispute); like an ordinary citizen, before the Supreme Court of India for redressal of a personal grievance which any civilian government of Pakistan would not have dared to keep unredressed.

It is evident that even when the people of the two neighbouring countries of this subcontinent do share their despair, their hope, their love and affection; besides culture and language; they are not sharing a similar system of governance. Whereas Indian Democracy is robust and draws its strength from a system, the one being practiced in Pakistan is fragile and depends on its Army Generals.

There is a clear connection between the people of India and Pakistan. But the similarity appears not to have percolated beyond that. India, despite its system failures, has a well entrenched democracy; Pakistan on the other hand is still under the spell of an Army holding Damocle's sword over the head of its Democracy. And this atmosphere of doubt puts a strange susceptibility into the minds of the people. Their travel from doubt to despair, despair to hopelessness and from hopelessness to hater; begins. The Pak Army catches on this hater of its people and targets it at its neighbouring country India. And thus the relationship quotient of Pak people with us comes to be reported as very low.

Whenever, in any country, the governance quotient meets a low, several other quotients will suffer a fall. The stability of systems and the prosperity of two people of two countries will improve those quotients. Most of all, the relationship quotient!

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18

Better Work: Worse Rank

The newly released data of National Crimes Records Bureau (NCRB) have convinced me about one thing. That statistics and lies are real kins. The Bureau brief baffles one, through its tabulated facts.

See, how figures can play foul and put friendly Puducherry and literate Kerala in the bracket of highest crime rate States. Bihar, U.P., NCR rank far below, your experience and understanding not withstanding.

Imagine Delhi not being anywhere near the top notch in crime. The cool and inviting Indore, Bhopal and Jaipur hold the dubious distinction of being the first, second and third in this race of crime record. I have visited all the three and was almost dying with delight to find no nakas or policeman with a gun for miles around. Jammu, in comparison, has a record of sorts for gun totting sepoys, nakas and speed breakers. J&K Police's second and third best way of arresting crime is naka and speed breaker, respectively. The first, of course, is not to register an FIR. To make my point home, I will cite two small incidents.

In the shining noon of a friendly winter and under the heaviness of a delicious lunch, my friend moved out of his club to reach back his place of work. His car was nowhere to be seen! The vehicle had been simply stolen. A few frantic up – downs in the parking lot later, the nearest police station was approached. The police blankly refused to register an FIR. No coaxing would work. My friend, like me, has failed to rear a patron; so, threatening the Thana people was out of question. He rang me for help. I, in turn, telephoned the divisional head of police, who was slightly know to me and was a fine gentleman. He listened and questioned me laconically. 'Don't you think, Mr. Vaid, registering of an FIR in an act of crime, should be as natural as water in the tap?' 'Very true sir!' I said and continued without pause. 'The water pipes are choked, sir!' Seven minutes later, car theft FIR was duly registered; A bash from the boss made the thenadars' pen move. What happened to lost car's recovery is a different story!;

In the second case again a question by a police officer. But the nature of query this time was in stark contrast. My house was burgled one night and in the morning I sent somebody to the nearest police chowki. My name was then, bearing a good official designation, so the police arrived promptly. A maoiana of Jai-e-wardat, however, convinced the police (me too) that no theft had taken place. Even when, broken windows of the house told different story and put some holes in my pocket. All formalities over, the junior police officer asked me politely, 'Sir, thank God, no loss, what use an FIR will be now?' Having gone through the pack-whole of this policing ordeal, I was not willing to let the incidence go without getting duly reported.

It was much later that I realized the what is what of this game. An FIR is a report with a serial number allotted to it. These serial numbers are then totalled and the figure reflects the rate of crime of a particular chowki or a police station. It is this collective data from these sources that the National Crime Records Bureau draws its figures from. The ranking in the crime rate, thus, is proportionate to the FIRs registered. In other words, a better policing scores worst ranking in NCRB annual reports.

So Friends! For once, here is a report which must be read upside down. It is a case of the best policing getting the worst of the rank. But then the statistics, as you all know, has notorious habit of playing a damp squib.

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19

Darbar Move-The Pain and Pleasure

It is very rare that pain and pleasure would emanate from one single activity. But it happens in the State of Jammu & Kashmir. And under a fixed calendar! This pain and pleasure act, generally, is effective from November 1st in Srinagar and May 1st in Jammu. We call it 'Darbar Move'.

From November Ist, the Srinagar roads have a sigh of relief; as those nasty – ever increasing in number – red beaconed vehicles of our Sarkar gracefully (read mercifully) get transported to the winter capital of the State. It is this time of the year that the woes of the commuters of Jammu city do commence. The pilot cars ahead of the cavalcades have neither any regard for the sound pollution, nor for the pedestrians. And the illegal usurping of the roads by unimaginable count of cars wearing shining red beacons, not only leave the other commuters flabbergasted, but also put them in doubt of having paid their respective road taxes.

But the pleasure of the road negotiators of Srinagar city is the pain of a whole Division of Kashmir. All concerned of Kashmir will now have to climb down to Jammu, if they wish to chase their file cases awaiting disposal or adjudgements on their disputes. In summer, this agony happens to be the fate of people of Jammu Division. This century old practice of 'Darbar Move' is religiously followed by all democratically elected governments of this State; literally walking on foot prints of the erstwhile unelected Maharajas. The poor public has been conditioned to keep counting their profits and losses in respect of this Darbar Move.

Outsiders may raise their brows and question the propriety of using an antiquated and archaic word for the seat of a democratically elected government. For the benefit and knowledge of those who are not acquainted with the ways and whims of our Sarkar, I may explain that Jammu & Kashmir is different and the use of word 'Darbar Move' for Government Seat is symptomatic and not symbolic. Our Sarkar is mandated for six years unlike yours which is voted for five years only. Furthermore, we allow our Mantris and their Darbaris to have two houses, one each in the two capitals of the State. What is so big about it? You may ask. And you may even add that these poor fellows have to live like nomads. Sometime here, sometime there!

Indeed it may be so, till you enter their palatial bungalows. The kings of the yore would envy those Mantris and their top brass. A report in a section of press giving details of expenditure incurred on repairs, renovation and furnishing of these houses where the Ministers reside, is enough to prove that how the Austerity Measures, otherwise ordered and tatooted by the Government is only one of its several hoaxes. This blatant pubic deception and happy 'miscarriage' of public money is complete with the incurring of big expenditure on the private houses of the Ministers for repairs, renovations, additions and alterations. It may be possible to retrieve the furnishings (which too is a supposition), but how the Estates Department will retrieve the civil engineering expenditures on these private houses, once these Ministers demit office; is anybody's guess. A fairly good part of SRE (Security Related Expenditure) pumped in by Government of India to combat militancy is used to construct Drawing Rooms, when it should have been used for compound walls or sentry posts only.

We care a fig for the adverse reports of your Auditor & Comptroller General and give a damn if we have failed to satisfy the Accountant General in several areas of expenditure. You must realize and appreciate that we are busy in Darbar Moves, every six months and have to undertake elaborate arrangements in order to smoothly affect this old royal practice. We do it, as you know, for the integration of two regions. And furthermore, our integration with India should come at a price. Why should Planning Commission of India, as reported, insist on 23 point reform programmes under Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission, for releasing our second installment of funds to the tune of 784.64 Crores. We have expended only less than half of the money released; it is because we have to shift places every six months. And you know, shifting encroach upon our time and energy. We must only be funded and not asked for accounts You're diluting our Special Status through these 'askings'.

Now see, the Union Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation has placed us at number 3 among the worst performing States. The Ministry appears to have paid no heed to the special difficulties and special status of Jammu & Kashmir. Judge us by what our Ministers say on development and watch for the ads churned out by the Information Department to eulogize the government performance. The inability of the Government to curb huge time and cost overrun quandary should not prick the bottom of Planning Commission of India and put Projects in the grip of delay. A Government which has to move to and fro between two capitals must be given some allowance in terms of time and cost over run.

All these big issues, not withstanding; as the Darbar shifts to pleasant summers, the common man stifles under unscheduled long cuts in electric supply and dry taps. The same goes good in respect of wintry Kashmir months.

But the pain of our 'file cases' having travelled across Banihal and Pir Panjal Range will put many in quandary. The Govt. Order directing offices to Move from one place to another, inter alia, religiously mentions that the offices will close on such and such date and such and such time. A similar strict provision is laid for opening, as well. But those of us, who have seen this Darbar, even from a distance; know that it is not for nothing that we rank third among non-performing States and happen to be happily inflicted by an 'overrun syndrome'. Our 'pains' and 'pleasures' rotate between Jammu and Srinagar, as we shut our shop officially for full seven days after every six months. Is there any other Govt. where all offices bracketed as Darbar-Move Daftars, remain authorisdely closed for full two weeks in a year. Add to this terminologies like 'advance party' packing and unpacking of records, or settings up a house afresh, on bi-annual basis, the no-work-period in Darbar-Move offices could be a full month in one calendar year. And two hundred ninty kms. Between Jammu and Srinagar or vice-versa is a matter of only eight hours now. Two capital towns which are only eight hours apart, are taking eight weeks to set their respective shops in their own turn of move.

You still want to know what is so special about us. We are special about our office timings as well. When your Chennai with its 46 degrees is working from nine to five we in summer, schedule our winter-capital timing to morning – noon hours. So when our heads of the Deptts. Are pepping upto work by noon in the pleasant weather of Srinagar, we call it a day in Jammu. We have not only two Divisions of Jammu and Kashmir (Ladakh is a part of Kashmir Division) or two languages and cultures to claim, we have two time-tables as well. We are not like other states of the Indian Union who have no special Article of constitution as a brooch. Please handle us with care-we are special!

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20

"Affraid of Each Other?"

It surprises me greatly when I find writers' of our national language expressing their grave fear of getting adversely effected by an international language. They appear to be so scared of the onslaught of English language that centuries old invaders of this country are drawn as parallels. They also maintain that even other foreign languages like German and French are also getting scared by the rapid growth and expansion of the English territories.

The introductory remarks of the brief lecture delivered in the seminar hall of the Academy of Art Culture and Languages in an interaction meet with an eminent laureate of Hindi Sahitya, few days back was also not devoid of this fear. Prof. Sahib (the Hindi Writer) made many bones about this impending danger, even when he was delving on several other issues of importance in the field of economics and literature. On the other hand Englanders too are growing weary of outside influences on their land and language. They think that the people of Asia origin in general and of the Indian Sub-Continent in particular are playing a diminuendo to them. They maintain England is undergoing a land and language diminution. For every four walkers on the street one is invariably an Asian. And the Lexicographers are no more orthodox about their Queen's English. Frequent entries of Hindi words in the present day dictionaries of English have compelled some to name the language as Hinglish.

Now, than, two language one fear makes the situation highly paradoxical. Hindi lovers in India are cursing English for slowly entering the pelvice of their Bhasha and lovers of standard Queen's English are unfolding their anguish and abhorrence to the Hindi/ Hindustani entries in the Oxford Dictionary. Hindi, nodoubt, with its enhanced potential has entered the womb of English. When each is having a bite into other's pie, why should they feel scary between them?

As a practitioner and preacher of a small basha like Dogri, the apprehension of the above mentioned two bulls of a language, remind me of a story which till date is oftenly quoted by my father, through in contexts much different to the one I am placing the fable into "A pebble and salt cube were made to enter water together. The pebble cried and cried for he was afraid of getting melted in the water. Salt cube silently nudged at the waist of the pebble to tell him stocially, "the melting in water belongs to me, you my dear pebble are crying without cause" That was the truth then and unfortunately holds on till date.

No water, running or standing, will ever be able to eat into English or Hindi, a smaller language like Dogri is the salt cube of the story.

Prof. Sahib had no doubt, a word of solace for the smaller languages too. "All regional bolies are the strength of the progressive writers forum", he said faithfully and with conviction. It is certainly very heartening to note that a prominent personality of Hindi Jagat should come to the rescue of regional languages and provide them succour and support of encouraging words. But our dilemma has a different hue too.

It is now constantly being lamented that Dogras more often than not are avoiding or rather killing the use of their mother tongue in their homes. Children, at home and at Schools, are guided and goaded, to use Hindi and English both in day to day conversation as well as in heir academics. Same is, lately, turning true of Kashmiri and Ladakhi. English and Hindi then, as much scared they may be of each other, are together indulging into an act of snuffing regional languages, consciously or uncounsciously, Independent and unaffected development of regional languages will neither come from VIII Schedule nor from Sahitya Akademi, it will come from people within and through constant encouragement by scholars/Writers/ readers of established languages. But a word of caution to our lecturing professor. We are regionalists and rate our languages' as regional languages (Khetri Bhasha) and don't like to be bracketed as "Bolies", Hindi Lexicons too need a change.

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21

Reporting Through Parallels

'Please Sir, Mr. God of Death
Don't make it my turn today
Not today
There is fish curry for dinner'.

Legendary Goan poet, Bakibab Barkar, put the prayer simply but naturally. Whether we have fish curry for dinner or not, we all wish to return to partake our waiting homely fare. But for many, on many occasions; there comes a blast, a stampede, a derailment, a BMW or a load carrier; between the morsel and the mouth. Floods and fire, too, are very efficient in destroying the family dinners.

The Mr. God of the poet appears to have fallen in evil hands. And, now, death does not come by turn. Neither it comes in singles or pairs. It believes in wanton destruction. But the most heinous and horrifying of these deaths are the ones which are of recent origin. Bodies get torn apart in a jiffy, with hands and legs strewn around in smoke. Bang ...Bang bursts a bag, a pressure cooker, kit or a bicycle and the operation is over. A set of highly motivated workers are working overtime to assemble bombs and passing them on to the executioners. The same are to be blasted in bazaars, streets, temples or mosques; anywhere and everywhere. The sound bites retrieved from the satellite systems reveal a gory tale. Each of these cowardly blasts, strategically called 'operation' is celebrated. Larger the toll, larger the festivity. Great Guys, these all, mastering the art of living by sucking lives! Their actions (read operations) are deliberate, conscious, motivated, focused. The activity is meticulously conceived, clandestinely financed, perfectly designed and neatly executed. Even the results are duly tabulated, communicated and rewarded. For every good output, there is further enhancement of the input. Can this killing of the innocent and hapless have a parallel? No it has not!

Yet, a section of electronic media does not hesitate to draw unnatural parallels. Many a times, the death toll of militancy is compared with the death toll of a stampede or fire accident etc. An accident does not arrive through a plan. How then this can be bracketed with 'the death by design?' The two Gods of death are different and can't (shouldn't) be compared. The overzealous newscasters often appear to be reporting with satisfaction that the casualties in terror related acts were far lower than this or that accident. Death is devastating, whatsoever is the means, but comparing the incomparable is doubly devastating.

Do these chirpy reporters of numerous news channels realize that, by doing so, they inadvertently are playing with militant's game ball? Already the class struggle of the Maoists and the senseless killings by the terrorists are being spoken in the same breath. Again, an exercise in comparing the incomparable! It is not only disturbing but horrifying when the accidents like stampede etc. and the acts of militants find a common space simply on the grounds of the end product i.e. the death toll. The two are different even in death. Both generate compassion for the victims. But the latter breeds a seething anger too, against the perpetrators. In their bid to be more newsy, the pretty reporters of the news channels, trip on this fundamental difference and thus make their reporting bad and bizarre. We react differently to different events, not because we are conditioned to do so. We do so because our cognizance of the event is total and we see through the difference. An elephant cannot be described through the partial description of six blind men of the fable. This simply is not done. Every news report has a central point. And a good news reporter will never push this point to the periphery and allow the peripheral to be the central.

Reporting is no babbling, jabbering of a reality show. It is a sagacious reproduction of the facts where adulteration and ill conceived concepts are simply indigestible. Channel reporters should keep their superfluous tongues in condom as the print media does its extra pens. Reprehensible and the tragic need not be mixed; they need to be fixed!

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22

Handling an Argument

Many a time or rather most of the time, Indians and Arguments tend to bear an uncanny synonymy. And our proclivity to load our argument with aggression and belligerence has been a breeding ground for fierce hostility, first fighting and even stabbing to death. Horrible reports are appearing in news papers. Arguments on trifles like parking space, overcharging or overtaking, return of wrong change or hitting shoulders on the pavement are resulting into unimaginable arguments and consequently into many unfortunate incidents. Why our arguments tend to show temper? Simply, because we are self possessed lot and our faith lies in self conceit.

People have different kinds of perception of a given fact. As two minds never think alike, dissimilar likes and dislikes are inevitable. And these likes and dislikes are sure to influence perceptions of a given one in a given situation. That kind of subjectivity in kenning can lead to clash in dialogue when argument is allowed to be devoid of objectivity. Most of the arguments involve intense emotions, as these arguments turn into clash of personalities. The point of discussion then may turn out to be personal, subjective and aggressive. We can save ourselves from this avoidable catastrophe of human relations by simply trying to understand our subjectivity, giving allowance to the subjectivity of the other party and shepherd the argument to an objective level. The dialogue will then not only turn out to be more useful, but the process of argument will also become pleasanter. Understand that all of us are entitled to our own view on men and matters and should be permitted to think very religiously about it, if we choose so. Only we need not bulldoze others into our belief or perception. We can offer our argument, logic, viewpoint or belief and allow others freedom to accept or reject it.

Because –

'A man convinced against his will
Is of the same opinion still'.

There are many who would like to believe Dale Carnegie, the author who according to 'Daily Express' of US gave birth to a self improvement industry through his books and who is believed to be pioneer of development of personal skills, self confidence and motivational techniques. The author who said; or rather rephrased an already existing counsel on argument; as under :

'I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way under high heaven o get the best of an argument – and that is to avoid it. Avoid it as you would avoid rattle snakes and earthquakes'.

Pursuing arguments recklessly; even when you may be correct; may cause unpleasantness around you. Dale in his book 'How to win friends and influence people' narrates a real situation as to how his friend saved him out of an argument with a harmless lie. For want of space, I will only tell the moral of the real life story. 'Never try to prove your host wrong even when you are sure that he is. You owe this courtesy to him in return to his wine and dine'.

After all an argument is only an effort to prove a point and most of the times it may be only your point, not others'. And if your point is the correct one; why to waste fire, heat, energy and sound on a point which is correct. For its correctness is going to get damaged or soiled by the wrong point of view of the other party. But we keep on arguing only to prove ourselves; mind you not the point; only ourselves and to prove the other party wrong. Again, not to correct the opponent, not to add something to his knowledge, not to educate him; but only to prove him wrong and thus try to insult or degrade him. Since the other party is more injured by the implied hurt then by losing the point itself, the argument ends in hostility or at least with a bad taste in mouth. So, winning an argument turns out to be almost a sure way of making enemies, rather than altering opinion of others. A bruised ego is certainly not going to accept you or your theories, even when convinced of its factual truth. It is; therefore, always best to follow Lord Chesterfield's theory –

'Be wiser than other people if you can; But do not tell them so'.

So, the best way of putting forward your argument is to prefix it with modest phrases like 'I may be wrong ...' or 'Let us compare our notes and then form an opinion' or 'You are probably right but let us examine the facts again' etc. There can be many ways of making your argument look warm and not challenging. Telling someone bluntly that you are wrong is like a personal attack. Like ridicule and abuse, it is not taken kindly and a vibe of animosity appears then and there. Generally, when we come to realize ourselves that we are wrong, we may graciously accept and say 'Oh, I appear to have erred!' But when the other party labels us wrong, we use all the defence mechanism to disprove the facts.

You wisdom would become a sharp weapon, if you use it to cut others to size. People hate such wisdom around themselves. No one wishes to be a pig in public. I will narrate a personal anecdote to prove that we admit our wrongs to ourselves easily and even to others if we are handled gently and with such tact that our self esteem is not compromised. I once purchased a Kashmiri carpet from one of those vendors who usher in their ware laden trolleys right under the nose of your gates. And they have greater nose for the gullible like me. The sincere and genuine looking market man threw a couple of carpets on my neatly tiled driveway, even before I could react to his obtrusive entrance. The design, thread weaving and the colour attracted me easily, as my eyes are passionate about all things beautiful. As this market was exclusive and private, I even entered into shabby haggling. And the carpet was bought for a paltry amount of Rupees Twelve Thousand. I was on cloud nine about the deal and waited and waited anxiously for my wife to return from office. (Please note that I have retired since and my wife is still in employment – one more bullet in her magazine to shoot me with). One look on my purchase and she said, 'who the hell told you to buy this Kanpuri rug?'

'Kanpuri! It is genuine Kashmir carpet".

'Kashmiri; my foot- now tell me how much you have paid?'

'Only twelve thousand, my dear. Is it not damn cheap?'

'Cheap ? You have been duped. It should not cost more than three thousand and half'.

I retorted, 'You are a corporate woman, not a carpet woman. I have served in Kashmir for twenty years and can feel the fluff of a Kashmiri carpet'.

But a doubt had emerged.

Next day, a friend visited me and on seeing new carpet on the floor of my drawing room, appreciated it profusely.

'Oh! What a beauty, the texture, the weaving, the design, the colour – it all is authentically Kashmiri' he said with apparent sincerity.

'No, my friend, it is not Kashmiri. I have been duped; it is a fake'.

The truth had dawned on me, but I would never agree to this before an insulting and accusing wife, even when I knew that she was right. On the contrary, my friend's sympathetic and appreciative attitude helped me to accept the truth of that raw deal and lighten my heart. Ridicule and abuse or mocking and sarcasm in your argument will never, never let you win. Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, rated by many as one of the classics of American literature, is not only a fascinating life story but could be used as a life skill book. Inter alia, he tells us how he conquered iniquitous habit of argument and transformed himself into one of the most able, suave and diplomatic men in American history. He did so by accepting a smarting rebuke of his friend who one day took him aside and lashed him with a few stinging truths. And the impossible, opinionated, judgemental, offensive, harshly argumentative Ben Franklin; who prided to put a slap in his words to win an argument; made a right-about-face. He began immediately to change his insolent ways of argument. He writes, 'I made it a rule, to forebear all direct contradictions to the sentiments of others, and all positive assertions of my own'.

In fact, advancing your viewpoint with a dab of diplomacy and a dowel of desirability is the most efficient way of handling both your argument and the opponent. Jesus Christ even went much further in his advice, 'Agree with thine adversary, quickly,' But if you can't resist the temptation of projecting your opinion, you can do it the way king Aktoi of Egypt counseled his son, 'Be diplomatic, it will help you gain your point'. Chanakya of Chanakya Niti fame had similar advice on argument. And the counsel has not turned stale even after thousands of years. We surely can apply this advice to our argument. Never say, 'You're wrong.' Instead, rephrase your words deftly and say, 'You may be right, but the facts signal something contrary'. This, some may say, is a gross extravagance of words. Why waste ten words, where three were enough to tell a truth. Well, frugality may be a virtue, but hurting others is a sin. So, it is better not to count the words when it comes to arresting emotional injury. Because, to be at peace with yourself, you have to be at peace with the world! So, make your argument not provoking, but peaceful; not belligerent but persuading.

Anger and argument should not be mixed. When you are in disagreement with a projected point, counter it calmly and skillfully with your viewpoint and not with your temper. Always remember the old rule that you can measure the size of a person by what makes him or her angry. If you get angry while arguing, you are giving a clue to your opponent to consider you a pygmy. Putting anger in your argument has another disadvantage. It may create barriers of misunderstanding and thus affect your opponent's areas of agreement. In that eventuality, your best of the logics will go waste as your anger has already blocked the channels of communication with your arguing partner. When you are calm, courteous, confident, and clear and communicative; you are listened to with more attention and also with some awe. An aura of authority will always help the argument to hit the target. Anger, on the contrary, may only manage a misfire. It also breeds hostility.

My readers may like to raise their finger and ask, 'What about the opponent, if he gets violent and abusive?' A natural and well asked question indeed! But please remember, my subject here has been 'Handling an argument skillfully' and a topic like 'Handling an opponent skillfully' may come next.

On opponents, I may only say for the time being that allow not a hurt to travel into you. Let no one be the master of your mind through enmity or opposition, criticism or curse. Remember these beautiful words of Mahatma Gandhi, 'I will not let anyone walk through my mind with dirty feet'. With the permission of this greatest political Mahatma of the world, I beg to add 'Nor shall I allow my dirty feet to walk through the mind of other'. The best way of handling your argument is 'Don't allow it get dirty'. Arguing is not boxing. It is a mind game and unlike boxing, can be played with loose fists and unrolled sleeves.

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23

Managing Classroom Anger

The seventy year old Buddhist nun, Chankhong, was speaking about many things, as the religious preachers of every religion tend to do. Engaging talk about emptying yourself and a Separate Self; of the belief that nothing can exist by itself alone and that everything is inextricably interconnected with everything else; etc. I had heard such things severally, in other Gurus' sermons too and was, therefore, receiving the words leisurely. Till I got hooked by a sentence, "Teach children to overcome anger," She was saying gently, but convincingly.

She had covered 'the Self and reached 'the Social Service Angel' status. Continuing her exposition, she was saying, "Besides regular studies, we need to teach children how to overcome anger. Every month, equivalent of one-third of a teacher's salary is given as bonus to the teacher, if effective anger management is taught in class. We have to bring spiritual dimension to children; we call it Peace Education". She had succeeded in doing this back home in Vietnam and desired to undertake this mission in India, starting from a remote village in Manipur.

Anger in classrooms of our schools, does certainly need management. It is often two fold here. Bullying and bashing within the commune and petulant teachers with a weakness for the whip. And don't tell me that corporal punishment is banned! In our classrooms, especially located away from urban centres, the rule against rod is followed more in breach than observance. Classroom teachers have often been seen getting exercised on trifles and behaving capriciously with hapless students. The conferred corporal punishment is sometimes, incredibly sadistic ... Sample : The depravity of a class teacher who commands the female students to undress in the classroom for having failed to mug their lessons correctly. Causing serious injuries like hearing impairment, wrist fracture, bleeding buttocks and the like, often come to our notice through press.

In our State, much goes unreported. Half trained, half motivated and half backed teachers; all over, in general and remote areas, in particular; still persistently believe in the since dead maxim of 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. Unfortunately, the illiterate and semi-literate parents too, happily subscribe to this theory. Such teachers, incapable of managing their own anger, do not understand the children's emotions or their anger. It is a common knowledge that a good number of teachers in most parts of the State are happily doing their duty in halves. Divided between their school hours and their supplementary activities like agriculture/ horticulture, petty shop-keeping, minor contractor ship and above all tutoring on payment; their anger in the classroom is thus the anger of the tired workers, ready to steam off anytime. And for some, targeted anger helps attracting private tuitions in their tutorial shops, in copious numbers.

Are these angry teachers in a position to teach their wards, the art of controlling anger? No, they are not! But that does not mean that Chankhong's advice cannot be put to use in our classrooms. No dispute that angry classroom will give birth to angry youngsters and they, in turn, will carry their anger in basketfuls, wherever they travel to.

Peace Education is, therefore, highly imperative. Teachers have to be trained in peace education and in subjugating anger. Only then, they will be able to teach their students, the art of living in peace by controlling their instincts of anger. 'Grief and disappointment give rise to anger; anger to envy, envy to malice and malice to grief again, till the whole circle be completed,' said David Hume. He missed one angle; that is, 'Anger giving rise to violence'. And violence is what our children should learn to eschew; beside; hate, indifference and antipathy.

Could peace education be not made a part of our school curriculum and teachers teaching anger management given incentives, as they do in Vietnam? If a small country like Vietnam, ravaged by war for pretty long, can practice the art of peace; Shanti swearing India should not fail to do so. Anger in our classrooms is leading to attempted suicides, to deformed personalities and to physical disorientations. A classroom is like a mini society which needs safe protection, systematic development and ensured progress. Presence of anger amongst teachers and students will not allow this to happen. 'Nip the evil in the bud', as they say. Harness the budding anger; channelise it into an effective positive energy. Managing anger of the classroom is as essential as managing the prescribed syllabus.

A good form of managing anger could be physical exercise, including games, yoga etc. But the best one is to channelise creativity. Restraining creativity is like not allowing lifting to the weight of a pressure cooker top. Let the children go amuck when they want to, only put a direction in their enthusiasm. The children, as we all agree, are full of energy, gregariousness and expanding capacities. Our classrooms generally take a negative view of these inherent capabilities and try to put a stop to them. The result is, we produce two types of children. One, excessively rebellious; the other, unwantedly submissive. In both cases, the end product is not as per the requirement of a humane but dynamic society. The half backed potatoes we are churning out of our schools or colleges are not and will not be welcomed by the globalized world.

The very dictionary meaning of the world 'class' is defeated if the students of a grade are not duly grouped or bonded, I say. And bonds can exist only in peace, not in anger. The evolved concept of today's education is to prepare the students for life test and not merely for class tests. Teacher of today is not a mere demagogue, he is a life coach. And angry life coaches cannot teach peace

It is heartening to note that some classroom practioners are using the age old techniques of yoga to harness anger. The students under punishment are asked to undergo exercises in pranayam such as Alom-Vilom, Kapaal Bhati etc. Another methodology could be asking the recalcitrant errants to undertake *shram daan* (rendering free labour). In our times, this practice was often put to use in rural schools. And the result was two fold. The uneven school ground would be leveled for free and the punished ones adequately fatigued through manual labour. They also learnt the lesson of dignity of labour in the process.

In the modern classrooms of cut throat competitions and high flown aspirations, anger will be free like oxygen. This anger has to be converted into positive energy, needing management to focus it in fruitful pursuits through expert management like that of an efficient nurse. Do not plug the anger; manage it through sublimation for the purpose of peace and gainful healthy activity. Anger when harnessed, is the best source of peace and a classroom is the best venue to initiate this onerous process. Interestingly, the scheme needs no funding; only some measure of consciousness, planning and will. So, why not give it a try?

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24

May-A Month of Many Things

May is gone! It is famous for its May Day, May Queens, No Tobacco Day and the hot blazing sun'. I find it a little anachronistic that a month which commences with a celebration by the workers should end with a 'No' to something which is liked immensely by most of them. Or has this been purposely done, to brew direct results?

Speaking of results, I am reminded that Indian May is famous for something more. It is during this month that Central and State Boards of Secondary' Education bring out their annual assessment of millions of students across the length and breadth of the country. May, therefore is a month of 'jumping' hearts too. With ambitions and competitions souring high, the Secondary School result with its religious awaiting, does not affect adrenaline of the examinees only. The anxiety engulfs the parents in equal measure. The Secondary School result had never had it so sizzling hot!

Many decades back the percentiles were no status symbol. Infact percentile was not even known, percentage and pass however existed. The children were assessed amongst relations and friends on the basis of their behaviour or at the most, their turn out. Not now! A student may or may not be a dedicated one; He may or may not be focused on a useful and worthwhile life-voyage; He may not know his maths inside-out or handle his language with eloquence or dignity. No matter! No bottoms are pinched for being braggish or brazen. The pinch or pat is directly proportionate with the percentage obtained.

The report card should speak high. For, it finds many a mention in offices, schools and kitty parties. So, May for many is a month for showcasing the marks sheets of their wards.

Allow me to be a little reminiscent of my old good times. When I stood first in my school in one of these Secondary Boards and exultantly touched my mother's feet, she said with a spirited smile, "God bless you, my son; but remember the unblessed ones too!' NO doubt then that those days the result percentages would entail only a praise, not a prestige tag. And the terms like cut-throat-competition were unknown. The phenomenon of suicides for poor performance in examinations was yet to come in being. Yes, the month of May is also the month of student-suicides now. And the number of such self inflicted deaths is increasing with passing of each May of the year.

Who is responsible ? Is the culprit; the peer pressure, parental pressure, school pressure, prestige pressure or the exhibitionist pressure! Little lives with immense future possibilities get expunged and the blessed ones are busy in counting their blessings. They have no time for the unblessed. How I wish my old lady would be alive today to preach ands propagate her dictum, 'God bless you, my son; but remember the unblessed ones too!; 'Grade System', some suggest, 'will help to fight the malady of percentages,' I am not very sure! My belief is that the malady lies in the social milieu and not the system. So, the solution would only come from the society and not from the procedures alone.

May is also a month of extended new admissions for the fresh schoolians. The little ones, who have so far been competitive in their own human nature ways, are now exposed to formal lessons in competition. The class test competition, the painting competition, the speech and song competition, dance and drama competition, sports competition and a host of other ones. And all this is essential for the growth and development of the young schoolian. But there has to be a method in this madness.

Winning is what the children like the most and they should be prompted at that. But, at the same time, these children need to be taught that losing is not such a hardship which cannot be faced. Grown-ups generally believe that children are too fragile to handle defeat. It is not so! Kids learn valuable lessons when their games result in winners and losers.

A mother of two, Suzanne Sievert, devised a new term to avoid the use of 'loser', between her sons. She said to the loser, 'He may be the winner, but you are the good sport'. This was the novel term for the boys. Ands she says, "When I explained it, my 'good sport' was very proud. And next time we played, my other son deliberately lost so that he could be a 'good sport' too".

You see, it all lies in education. For these two sons their Mom is the society and more than winning or losing, they respect the rating of the society. If the civil society emancipates itself from this phobia of wining and losing and be a 'good sport', many a suicide could be cut in the face.

May is also the month of May Flowers on the mountains. Let us live like those flowers and allow all pressures to evaporate in to thin 'year'. Success in life is measured on a balance, bearing multiple scales. A Board Examination result hardly figures in that ultimate reckoning. History is full of great personalities who were poor in school percentage but did wonders in life. Let May be a month of living and discovering, as you leave the academic school to join the school of life.

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25

Of Parents and Children

Goodness, boy! If you don't like it, alter it; and if you can't alter it, put up with it'. This was the quick advice of Mrs. Morel to her impulsive son when he groaned abut a school master, who, he said hated him. The woman protagonist of D.H. Lawrence's 'Sons and Lovers' was surely not the first mother to load her son with an advice like that. And she certainly is not the last. Children while growing, have to bear with many a thing, a lot of them petulantly unlikeable. From their height to weight and from their biceps to their pocket money; things are never as per their aspirations. If you are brainy type and wish to discuss issues with your Dad, you find that the senior is under his own airs of intellectualism and has not time for a mere kid and the child, under his scheme of principles, is the responsibility of the mother. The mother, unfortunately, is so struck by the stomach that she simply refuses to go beyond her cuisine and culinary. Her happiness lies in thrusting food down the hapless throat of her beloved child. She has no time to read between the nes. The poor child, satiated in stomach, wishfully desires a lunch or his brain, but who cares!

On the contrary (and in consonance with God's will) the id with a closed mind and open belly; is so situated that his father wishes him to be a seeker of knowledge. His mother's ular prayer to the gods is the prayer of a weary, suffering from ailing gluttony of her ever eating son. It is okay to ask a question as to why the children generally tend to do what they ought not to do. But why the same question is not put to the parents, as well? Did'nt Paul Morel's mother ~~not~~ know that her frail son couldn't alter all that which he disliked? Could he, for example, exchange his school master, the one who hated him, with someone nicer? Not, I suppose, without leaving the school! And Mrs. Morel knew that Paul could not do that. Yet she, instead of facing the uncomfortable Situation or seeking a solution to the mental agony (perceived or true as it may be) of her son; took refuge under an act of proferring advice. For, advising is the easiest way out. The second best being indifference!

All those who are responsible for the welfare of the children, have the inherent vice of wearing one or the other, that is, advice or the indifference, around their necks. And almost all children know it. But, sadly, a large number of parents act in ignorance and claim to be doing this for their children. We wish that parents would have read Stacia Tauscher. He says, 'We worry about what a child will become tomorrow, yet we forget that he is someone today'. There are many books in the market, titled such as; Right Parenting, Friendly Parenting, Creative Parenting etc. But are there not as many available about Controlling of Anger? Even then the anger exists in abundance. Wrong parenting too, is all around; despite knowledge of right parenting only a book stall away. Books in the market and their reading in the common rooms will be of no use till we put our belief in the maxim that the smallest deed is greater than the grandest intentions.

The biggest cleave between the children and the parents is that the child has more trust in a deed, whereas his parents rest their belief on intentions. A natural example of this could be that a child kicks when he wishes to, but elders are controlled by several factors and are not able to kick even when they have an earnest intention to do so. The fact of the matter is that the parents generally, are 'theorists', unlike children who profess 'practice' as their religion. All elders derive pleasure and satisfaction from teaching their wards a wisdom which they themselves have long forsaken.

An affectionate father was, once admonishing his son, 'Yesterday is a cancelled cheque, tomorrow is a promissory note; today is the only cash you have. So, spend it wisely'.

'But Dad', said the son, 'You have always been talking of your yesterdays or about my tomorrows. Is not your present, worth any cash?'

The father, a knowledgeable person, folded his tongue politely and mused upon his act. It dawned upon him that his child doesn't need a teacher; he needs a model figure for the lessons of life.

Then, there is the story of a scowling mother who would try to tell lovely tales through a stony face. One day she told her sulking daughter, 'Look, a smile is an inexpensive way to improve your looks'.

The little girl thought for a while and then broke into a broad smile. But she asked her mother a question too.

'Why don't you, Mom, wish to improve your looks?'

This is what I call, wisdom in operation. The parents wish to prove their knowledge; the children wish to use theirs. That is how the theorists and practioners have been on an uncommon plane. A chair despite its best designing will only remain a furniture piece, unless it is used as a seat. Sitting converts the chair form 'piece' to the 'piece of use'. All parents need this transformation, so that their children could use the 'chairs' to sit on; for else they all will remain 'mere pieces' – artifacts displayed in a museum.

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26

Be True to Yourself: No Breach of Personality Please

When I was a child student, I used to get immensely and easily influenced by my teachers in their mannerism and would subconsciously copy their physical traits and attributes. One teacher would prompt me to imitate his wears, the other one his tone and tenor, still the third's graceful gait would I gladly practice. I had a natural instinct for these little carbon copy adaptations and would take on them effortlessly. Without least affectation, whatsoever!

The process for me was as natural as fish taking to water and the birds to the sky. That was my way to taking lessons in personality development. That was then. The fact notwithstanding that I had never gone near the likes of Dale Carengie or Shiv Khera, then. 'The laws of least effort' as propounded by self help exponent, Deepak Chopra, appeared on the world screen much later. Also, my school mates and the scholarly around me were not remotely acquainted with the modern genre of books called 'Self Help Books' : 'Personality Development Books' or 'Life Coach Books' et all.

This does not, however, mean that the great human guides and philosophers like Freud, Young, Aristotle and Socrates were not the favourites of the academically literate. It was then as it is now. Rather, the lessons in the couplets of Surdass and Lord Krishna's sermons in the Gita were not only read and heard or sung and preached, but also put to use. Their use was devotedly avid and avidly devoted in almost all households. The degree of use, though, varied and was unabashedly proportionate to the caste and class of the households.

These and several other scriptural teachings were uncontested tools and techniques of personality designing. But great men of the yore, as also the protagonist of Holy Gita, were to me then, mere icons of worship. Figures far removed could not be for real to a small boy who was fond of imitations. Abstract is a poor counterpart of Concrete; when it comes to wielding influences on the 'underteen thinking potato'. My teachers were physically real and thus practically influencing.

Teachers those days were real mentors and like the kneaded clay of the potter, I was gladly available for getting shaped and re-shaped. The inherent error of the process was not known to me, then.

I was happily and fervently taking to this technique of getting shaped through copying and enjoying the results. It was as if I had complete power on myself at that tender age. One day I was my English Teacher Santokh Singh with his ferocious mien and unfaulted speech; the other day I was my Hindi Teacher Saroop Chand with bright Budha head and vast island eyes. Still on other occasions I would turn out to be my Mathematics teacher. This one briefly, though! Mathematics never attracted me and the smart young bespectacled, impeccably dressed Mr. Rehual Kant had to bear the burden of my grudge with subtractions and multiplications. Later, he turned out to be my most remembered teacher. Unknowingly, I had picked up from him the art of getting dressed gracefully.

And till this day, I have never flaunted a new dress. I simply put my body into it with such natural ease, as if I was born into it. It is a simple repeat of yolk and shell of the egg. The effects are marvelous, impressive and original. Sometimes adaptations get imbibed into you with such natural ease that you become 'water'. Water is colourless, odourless and shapeless; but still it is an entity without a parallel.

The years flew by. The underteen took to teens and the classroom changed with change in standards. The set of teachers which were changing lethargically in lower sections were now changing vigorously and in entirety. My job had grown difficult. Faithful adaptions and pure imitations of the early years had started countenancing some distractions. By the time I was in standard tenth, the teachers were changed like quilt covers. The management had developed a new love for clean administration and in the process different sets of teachers were put to probation. The effect on our studies and my copying experiments was simply devastating.

My burden was twofold. Besides studies getting fractured, my proficiency in the favourite game of copying on personality traits was getting grievously impaired with this frequent change in 'persona dramatis' of my life. Distractions, however, did not rest on this single factor.

My class had suddenly allowed entry to a bevy of pretty and not so pretty girls. Some highly gregarious; some coyly shy; moderate none! The school had gone co-educational. Boys in their middle and late teens, already under the whip of psychological and physiological sticks were suddenly exposed to a new sociological milieu. Cohabiting heterosexuals before a common black board is no mean task to accomplish. The management of the school had desired to perform the task at the cost of semi-disturbed teenagers who were otherwise shining happy with the entry of the Eves in their garden. Lovely distractions, but distractions all the same!

Some attractive young ladies also arrived later as new teachers. My experiments in imitation had to suffer new variables. Hitherto male fiefdom was struck by females. Copying this class of teachers was neither to my liking, nor my field of expertise. Already I was nicknamed as lass-lad because of fairness and girlish looks. I did not desire to compound my embarrassment by copying these young ladies. But some attributes of theirs were an open invitation to the imitator in me. I indulged into this luxury at night before a looking mirror. Come morning, the mirror would be wiped and the body washed. All legendary traces of the night copying purged entirely!

While shaping and reshaping of a self continued through the process of copying, imitations, adaptions, selections, rejections and reselections etc.' the young womb of my dwarf personality was laden with traits which were drastically contradictory. When two siblings quarrel, the hope of truce is not far away. This is, however, not so with different personality traits when assembled in one basket through sheer leisure and pleasure. Being not akin, they do not cohabit peacefully. They quarrel, contradict; fight and fret. The resultant personality is a bundle of contradictions. That was me. My self medication of developing a personality by borrowing and copying traits from left and right had failed me. Copying does not pay; neither in school examination nor in life.

Gradually the realization of being myself dawned on me. The 'original me' though covered under the debris of my audacious experimentation of teenage years, was still alive and pulsating. That is when I started de-educating myself to get back to the real. Tending to be a photocopier is wrong education. Each of us is a direct creation of God and God's package is not discriminatory. Each package is unique and peculiar. Each kit contains all the tools; grey matter, creativity, IQ, EQ etc. etc. No borrowings and imitations are required. Everything is in place. Explore properly and groom correctly. Nobody has put this more tellingly than Johan Mason – 'You were born original. Don't die a copy'.

Hold to yourself fast please and stay original. Do not borrow and commit the error of that old child student. The parallel medicines tend to stagger and may keep you hamstrung on the rope. Neither on earth, nor in sky! That is what they say 'Being neither here, nor there.' Firm up! Original is firm and firm is original!

Originality is respected even in the mundane affairs of marketing and production. There are rather legal provisions available against copying, producing imitations and duplication. In the world of letters too, plagiarism is a cognizable offence and Copy Rights Acts have both legal and ethical sanction. How then, in the area which concerns creations of God, can the imitations and duplications be permitted ? Our copy rights are with our Creator. We cannot authorize anybody to copy us; unlike the authority available in the field of publication and production. We can neither borrow, nor lend the originality of each personality text. This text created cannot be superimposed or tampered with Only additions or subtractions are permissible by way of development. God wishes me to stay original and not a prototype. I am a patented product : Me & Me Inc!

Carbon copies are thus, strictly prohibited in the field of personality formation. Breach of personality copy rights is an affront to the Creator. I am His image. How can I allow myself to be tampered or dismembered ? Same goes for you please! Bum all the 'carbons' you have. You don't need them anymore. Carbon copies have to be rendered out of fashion. Once for all! Remember your Gautama Budha : 'You yourself, as much as anybody in the universe, deserve your love and affection'. Lau Tzu puts it even more convincingly : 'The snow goose need not bathe to make itself white. Neither need you do anything but be yourself'.

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27

Nurse Your Memory, Not Your Machine

Rote learning has been a sacred tradition through ages and through countries. Memory then had to work over time as there was no support system available to lighten the burden of brain. The 'hippocampus' was none the worse for that. This region of the brain, which is key to the memory has a tendency to shrink, if not kept pulsating. Mercifully, it loves two things to remain active. One, a regular open air physical activity; two, a regular memory training. Sadly, the modern, generation is lacking in both. The results are certainly disturbing.

A new abundance has emerged. Abundance in poverty! Poverty in fitness, poverty of remembering things! And an effort to seek sustenance in machines is what the modern man is trying to do, to manage this new found poverty. Running in open is getting fast replaced by running on a tread mill and information/knowledge storing has been taken over by machine.

The white information spreading across the space may be more correct on facts and figures, but the reckless absence of 'grey' (read grey matter) in their 'white' (white information) keeps it cold and lifeless. There is a more serious threat, as well.. The fast growing habit of using computer memory, we may call it sim memory also, or rather entire dependence on it, in place of brain memory may allow the hippocampus to shrink slowly but steadily. This apprehension may sound foolishly over-reaching or a cry wolf, but homos~~a~~epian is said to have lost its monkey tail only because of its disuse.

A study conducted by the Institute of Neuro Science at Trinity College Dublin, has found that one third of the British people under the age of 80 cannot remember their own phone numbers. I don't find it strange. It is as simple as the fast dying habit of storing your monthly provisions in your kitchen store with coming up of Malls at a stone throw. When Big Mall with its excellent storage facility is only a hundred metres away from your house, you prefer to make short term purchases as per your consumption and avoid the inconvenience of bulk collection of victuals and the arrangement of their storing as per need priorities.

When telephone numbers can be stored in a cell, why keep them on the shelf of your memory. Yes, why? Only that over a period of time your kitchen store, because of being in disuse, may get fungus-plants and consequently turn unfit for storage. This danger is even greater in case of our memory cabin. If not used appropriately for the purpose it has been devised, it may gradually shut its shutters. This will leave us to either lead a compromised life or scout for a memory trainer. Like life coaches, these trainers lately, have come to earn immensely well, 'because of duds like us. A good many of us have, in last few decades already paid huge bills to this new breed of experts called Life Trainers. And only because we are reckless and managed not our minds well! Are we going to repeat this for our memory too, by allowing technology to memorize everything for us and thus putting our memory to jeopardy?

Technology overuse by children is being viewed by psychologists as e-addiction, sharing characteristics of other addictions; emotional shut down and lack of concentration being the principal ones. A study has found newly discovered and serious mental illness called 'internet use disorder' and has been included in international Psychiatric Manual. Gurukul style rote learning may have its parrot fashion and failures, but it was an excellent exercise in memory training. There is nothing like 'Bad Memory', claims

Ed Cooke – a Grandmaster of Memory.

Cooke insists that the key to remembering is learning to think in more memorable ways. He began teaching himself memory feats at eighteen, when he had to be on a hospital bed for three months. To impress the nurses, he began practicing as long as eight hours a day. He can now learn 1,000 digit number in an hour and has evolved several memory training techniques. The forgetful author Joshua Foer was persuaded by Cooke to take part in the World Memory Championships which the author chronicles in this 2011 best seller : 'Moon Walking with Einstein : The Art and Science of Remembering Everything'.

Memory training is not a game, but a necessary valuable skill. That is why this occupied a prime place in ancient Indian learning system (in China, as well). In the west, it was first described in a Latin textbook called Rhetorica ad Herennium written between 86 BC and 82 BC. It calls a memory an 'image' and the space it occupies in mind a 'place'. Providing 'place' to 'images' has been our quick-stable-memory mechanism too. Modern memory is fading because we are not storing the memory i.e. 'image' at its right 'place' viz. Our brain. We like to store it in machines.

Joshua Foer in his book 'Moon Walking with Einstein : The Art and Science of Remembering Everything' advises us to build 'memory palaces' for quick recall i.e. associate a thing you want to remember with a vivid image. Latest research in neurobiology and cognitive science has now concluded that IQ, long thought to be largely unchangeable after early childhood, can in fact be raised; and not by a niggling point or two; through enhanced understanding and chiseled memory. Learning attentively, memorizing poetry, learning new languages and skills are said to be improving the cognitive function. Brain scans show that handwriting engages more sections of the brain than typing. Even putting off your Blackberry and letting your brain idle away can help you in being creative; as it allows an increased activity in white matter while the brain is at rest.

Ed Cook is not actually cracking a joke when he says, "I have a theory that it is in the interest of tech-giants to make us as empty headed as possible. They want us saying, 'Oh! How do I get back to my house?' so that they can sell us something to help." When our fingertips fiddle with the mouse to open internet, a whole new world opens before us. But when well oiled mind and memory is at play, a rich imagination comes into being. Knowing your stuff is like nourishing your eyes. An appropriate lens enhances the sight of a myopic eyes, but if you close the eye lids, the lens can't make us see and turns into a useless accessory.

Place your PC only after your 'hippocampus', not before it. The latter may get annoyed. Lest you loose your way home and knock at a hostile door! After all, the address you have stored in your sim-memory will only see the screen if you press the right buttons. And your memory alone will get you to those buttons. In this mind versus machine gambit, I will vouch for the first for a personal reason too. The machine has never come out for me with a *Misra Sani*, the second line of the couplet. The second line also comes out from the same source, as the first one came from. But if you have a machine with the imagination of a poet, please lend me the same for a few weeks, as I am struggling hard to complete my new poetry book. Memory, thoughts, imagination and choice of words – the inputs for the verse, are great leisure lovers. They don't open up promptly like your internet. But as they unfold languorously, the world stops. And listens (sic.)!

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28

Patience - A Life Skill

Schools in our times were influenced by the ancient system of Gurukul teachings in at least one method. Making pupils learn by rote! Math tables would be mugged by repeating them in unison and in soulful tunes. I can still hear the sing song rhymes of 'Ek doona doona, doo done chaar'. Numbers are no words and thus rhyming them like verses was not possible. But we would adjust our vocal chords and move our arms with such an incredible ingenuity that the classroom would reverberate like a Sangeet Pathshala. And no pleasure was greater, except of course that long bell of Chhutti. As soon as that long bell of relief and emancipation would begin to ring, our 'Do done chaar' would abruptly dissolve into the cacophony of – Chhutti hai, bhai chhutti hai. Both the activities had their respective share of happiness attached to them. But not the mugging of those English quotes! The impatient and belligerent English teacher would order us to learn – 'Rome was not built in a day' and with its word for word translation – 'Rome Ek din mai nahi ban gaya, thha'.

We, as pupils, were mere switch buttons of our teachers then and it took me many years to realize that the quote under reference, in fact, had much to do with the Art of Patience than the art of making Rome. My aggressively authoritative English teacher who supported his scowl and unruly moustache with equal aplomb, had groomed his impatience with such impropriety that he would have abandoned the quote for another one attached with Rome and Nero, had he known that the implied meaning of the much talked maxim was a lesson to learn patience. Patience was never a virtue with him. Neither was it with me, till I realized that patience is not a virtue only as an opposite of a Vice, it is an imperative life skill. More so, in the current world where time is getting redefined in term of 'Now', 'Immediate' and 'Instant'. In this new culture-world of 'Me' and 'My' and, where instant coffee or dip-dip tea has smartly replaced the slow brewing/boiling of long leaved *sabaz chai* and two minute noodles have pushed the poor pakoras out of the children's menu, the patience is out to get bashing.

When we assume that our right or need is superior to others or that our time, belief, action must take precedence over others, we are becoming a breeding ground for impatience. In plain words, naked selfishness being practiced in this society with gay abandon, unfailingly result into intolerance; intolerance into clash; clash into anger; anger into violence; and violence successfully sucking into the vitals of the systems of the State and of the life. We all, in our times, must have mugged the English quote about Rome and its making, but very few must have realized its implied teaching. On the contrary, we want to build our Rome, here and now. The Hindi idiom of 'Hatheli pai saron nahi ugti' – 'You can't grow your mustard instantaneously' is simply idiotic for this hip-and-hype generation. They would love to have cars made without brakes and crossings without signals. But, imagine the eventualities in such a situation. That is why I say that patience is not only a virtue, it is essential life skill. This could be cheapest tool to control chaos and germinate peace.

Patience can make life wholesome, an easy-to-tackle affair. Impatience can burn body, blood and brain. The later is like frying food in high heat, former like allowing it to simmer under sustained temperature and protect all its flavours and nutritious elements. Patience leads to knowledge. A hurried internet search is no match to a patiently conducted systematic research. Jerome Rajarethinam says' A systematic and well groomed thought process will never crumble before thoughts of instant attraction, herd mentality, imitations and compromises'. Life is not an Italian pasta, it is like Indian Rajmash, and those lovely kindney beans are not worth eating unless boiled patiently and appropriately. Patience teaches calmness and calmness leads to better understanding. When we have better understanding of things, our capacity to handle men and matters get enhanced and we grow. Impatience, on the other hand can impair our thought process which eventually could lead to wrong decisions, affecting our physical and mental health. Frustration could be a direct progeny of impatience and could lead us to the path of chronic diseases like BP, diabetes, strokes etc. Radhanath Swami has put it differently. He says 'If you compromise your integrity for the cheap thrill of this world, you are going to suffer miserably'.

When you allow your patience to peter, you permit anger to enter. And anger is dangerous. It can deprive a Sage of his wisdom and a Prophet of his virtue. It has a strange but unfailing propensity to control minds and direct both brain and body to behave not only with an uncouth belligerence, but many a time, dishonourably too. Anger has another dismal property. It dissolves affection, understanding, cooperation and the collective will to seek solutions. Impatience and anger can also cause hurt. Patience can not only heal, but also helps, Applied skillfully, it can turn anger into a useful weapon. And Aristotle's advice on anger management only proves my point of practicing patience in anger. He says' Anybody can become angry – that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and in the right time and for the right purpose and in the right way – that is not within everybody's powers and is not easy'. Well, a man who knows the art of practicing patience can also husband his anger the way great Greek master wants us to. Patient man is a confident man and would not subscribe to a 'victim mentality syndrome'. He would, thus, refuse to requital, for the hurt and ideas of revenge, vengeance or retribution would not attract him. A patient man would be more attracted to 'forgiveness'. For, he is strong enough to control himself. His belief lies in the ancient wisdom, 'Forgiveness is like taking a psychological bath, it keeps you fresh'.

It was about fourteen hundred years ago that Pope Gregory named 'wrath' as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Greed, gluttony, sloth, lust are also in that list; besides envy and pride. I have observed that pride and patience are not best of the friends. Envy too is in kinship with impatience. There are theorists, therapists and psychologists who believe that too much of patience could turn out to be a sealed pressure cooker over a burning oven. If the lid on the top is not releasing the steam inside, the cooker is sure to burst. Some adventurers in the field of mental health have gone as far as the practice of Destructotherapy. In this controversial form of anger management you enter an Anger Room and smash articles like TVs to mannequins and exit smiling and content. But not before paying a hefty sum for this privilege. One such Anger Room in Dallas, USA, charges upto $75,000 for the unconventional and weird way of releasing tension. In Spain, the entrepreneurs do organize outdoor events where people pay to demolish cars, appliances and computers with sledge hammers. In Berlin, a vending machine called Anger Release Machine would automatically smash plates for a fee ranging between one dollar to twenty dollars. Look, how your anger and impatience can earn great profits for those who let you believe that chronic suppression of anger can cause high blood pressure, heart disease or depression. And that, when you let loose on occasions, you vent the emotional steam from life's pressure cooker! Such gimmicks, however, can be afforded by the rich only. In India and also in the East, where we are extremely short of dollars and the articles awaiting a smash, we have age old wisdom of practicing patience through Meditation, Yoga and; now crumbling; Joint Family System. Brotherhood and social entrepreneurship are also our practiced ways of busting stress. Patience is a life skill and something to be imbibed internally by mastering your anger. It is a situation of growing perpetual peace in your body and mind and not a stuff of the market. Patience and peace are blood relations and they basically live in mind and heart and not in the physical body. Our body borrows this highly valued content from our mind as naturally as moon gets its light from the sun. Braking plates or TVs, therefore, is not a therapy; it is insanity or at best 'a quirky way of the rich'.

Patience helps us at another level too; in achieving what we desire ardently. Persistent efforts could lead to the fulfillment of our desires as per the law of Attraction – Likes attract Likes. This belief is based on the idea that the people and their thoughts are both made of pure energy and that energy attracts energy. Rhonda Byrne in his famous book 'The Secret' explains that the Law of Attraction deals with our desired objects. The law states that if you visualize and strongly think of any object or opportunity, then that object and the opportunity will both come to you. Paulo Cohelo, the famous novelist, in his wisdom soaked novel, 'The Alchemist', propagates that when you pursue your aims with all your energies, the whole Nature conspires to help you in achieving your goal. The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari's author Robin Sharma also maintains that the moment you write out your life aims, natural forces will come into play which start to transform these dreams into reality. Lord Krishna in his sermon to Arjuna, had unwound this truth five thousand years ago – 'Whatever form a devotee seeks to pursue with shraddha, strong thought, I make that thought of his unswerving (7:21)'. You will see that whether it is the law of attraction or the idea of energies conspiring in your favour; whether it is Nature coming into play to fructify your dreams or the Lord Himself promising unswerving support; one basic and essential ingredient is the intense desire, dedication, devotion or a waking dream. Patience may not be mother of these attributes, but it is surely a perfect nurse for them all.

In simple and plain words – persistence with patience is what we need to develop to achieve our goals. Edison who patented a thousand inventions, once failed in his experiment of a new discovery for as many as one thousand times. And see the patience of this great man of inventions; he summarizes his thousandth failure by simply saying ‘Now I realize that there could be more than one thousand ways of conducting this particular experiment’. Patience here is not a word in the book or a virtue to belittle the deadly sins; it is a scientifically proven skill which helps us to achieve what we desire. The story of The King Bruce and the Spider was only a story for me in my junior school with a moral: ‘Try, Try again’. In fact, it is a lesson to learn patience and a route to reach success. Interestingly, patience can also be a potent pill against future worries and nagging wives. Faced with’ patience, head hanging worries and impetuous wives may not look as scaring as you perceive them to be? Perseverance or capacity of forbearance is not only a mechanism of endurance, it more than not will lead you to have the last laugh too.

“Those who fret and frown look like a clown.
The ones who are patient and wise
Are the right size”

My nani in her chaste Dogri would always admonish her six married daughters ‘Dheeyo! Jerdi dharedi, Kutya nein jendi (Look Daughters! Patience eventually pays). Nothing qualifies patience or a life-skill, more aptly than these five Dogri words of wisdom. When you practice these, peace and tranquillity come to you like swallows are drawn by the summer and then, happiness cannot escape your address!

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29

The Polgamy of Learning

God and Satan are supposed to be living within a stone's throw from each other. So has been good and bad. I have been always trying to comprehend without success as to how and why God and Good should be so precariously placed. God of almost all religions is being shadowed by Satan, unless of course, this is like Day and Night or more appropriately like the Day Light and Nigh Darkness. Like spring and autumn; like warm and cold or even like being fed properly against an all empty stomach. But when it comes to teaching or preaching, the most common topic has always been how to be good (read Godly).

Despite the fact that religious and moral preachers, philosophers and scholars, teachers and parents; all have been diligently endevouring to perpetuate good and teach generations after generations; all the evils of the Evil; The poor good more often than not is being outsmarted by roughish Bad. Why it should be so? Not because Good is weak or poor in fecundity. Not because it is not warm and comfortable like its neighbour, Mr. Bad. To my mind, the fault lies with the teachers of all above mentioned genre and their poor method of dispensing moral education to their disciples, students and children.

Bernard Shaw once remarked, 'If you teach a man anything, he will never learn', Learning is an active process and only that knowledge that is put to use, sticks in our mind. A child learns to walk, not by reading books on walking. He learns this art by observing people walking around him and the motivation provided by the mother. She exhibits before him as 'walking experiment'. But this is not the only reason of the child playing the game. He watches with evident interest and curiosity that the older around can easily get transported from one place to another in the lounge or between the rooms. This excites him and an urge to do the same is ignited in him. And when his urge, effort and motivation combine with the teaching of the mother or senior sibling; his learning not only comes naturally, but also easily. Since this newly acquired knowledge is put to a regular use by the child, it sticks.

Don't harbour a notion that motor skills are different from mental skills, when it comes to acquisition of knowledge. Learning your Algebra and your cycling both need, first an urge and then the practice. Most of the teaching which is being done from behind a classroom table and preaching done from a podium fail to stick to the mind for two good reasons. We learn a lot about Good, but do not put this knowledge to use. The result is what we see around – a practical scarcity of the commodity called goodness. On the contrary, our friends who believe in Bad are always out to experiment and hit the Net regularly. Consequently, even a small tribe of theirs successfully spreads their knowledge around.

Number one reason is that this knowledge is being imparted even before the urge or ignition of the recipient has been aroused. Number two; there is no system in place where this regularly imparted knowledge is put to actual practice. No doubt then that the education hidden in the proverb, 'Honesty is the best policy, as taught in school text book or the wisdom of being virtuous as preached at religious congregations, remains struggling in the skin of its words and idioms only. When education takes the form of advice, the receiver becomes a passive player. As there is no urge first and then there is no practice. Later This type of teaching turns out to be an exercise of pouring water in a pitcher without checking on its leaks. The learner also finds no opportunity to watch goodness moving places like the siblings of that child out to learn walking.

Most of the good is handed over like the physician's prescription which is written in an ink shining with the glow called as 'I know everything'. Naturally, it is neither received with full preparation and desire, nor sticks where it should. The tawdry teachers and practitioners of the Evil, on the other hand, do impart their followers practical lessons from the first available opportunity. They successfully create hunger for their commodity by ensuring quick results and rewards. As their tribe expands, they tend to get a sort of loose social approval, as well. Learning Good through lectures, therefore, is certainly not a workable method. It is no good for any other learning, as well.

Self learning could be an alternative. You can give yourself something easily and quickly by borrowing it from books, elements and life. Indian saints and Sufis have been practicing this art since ages. This skill of learning through self has many names. Religionists call it self realization, self actualization, finding the Self etc. Psychologists call it self-analysis or self introspection. Sociologists call it self- criticism or self examination. Writers have often called it self-appraisal or self assessment or self criticism – 'khud ki tanqeed'. In this self learning process, one comes to believe in certain tenets of life and labours to live up to them. Goodness has a fairly good chance of getting propagated in this system. However, the principles, tenets or the standards to be upheld be set wisely and in stealth from Satan. We learn best from our mistakes, if we know well the art of FTD used by the American who wrote 'How to Stop Worrying and Start Living'. FTD means the 'Fool Things I have Done' and this bestselling author who has been ruling the world with his wise words since late thirties of the previous century, would keep a record of all Fool Things committed. When you put your follies or mistakes in black and white and review them on regular basis, you learn the art of segregating chaff from the grain; good from the bad.

If you wish to be a wise man; to be a creature of logic and not merely a mirror of emotions, you must review your thoughts.

and actions at regular intervals. You may be a happy person if you go by the dictates of your heart, but you may become a useful person if you choose to be guided by the brain. In fact, an appropriate mix of heart and mind is liked by goodness. Another important aspect of self learning is to eschew your ego. Self effacing has been traditionally used as a tool by self seekers of the saintly order. We can practice this art in worldly moderation in the beginning. But remember all cholesterols are not bad. It is the false ego which needs the treatment.

Self criticism is one of the finest ways of educating yourself. Ben Franklin had marked his three serious faults – wasting time, stewing around over trifles, arguing and contradicting people. Are not most of us suffering from these faults ? If yes, we should practice Ben Franklin's method of eliminating these handicaps. He would choose one fault at a time and battle against it for a week. Yes, regularly and keep a record of his fist fight with his fault. He would even evaluate on daily basis as to how many times he has passed or failed. Keeping a written record of his daily bouts helped Franklin immensely in learning the art of conquering his faults. It certainly can help us too. Remember those grey coloured Report Cards of your school which the teachers would insist on getting signed by the parents of each ward. You could befool that pretty looking young teacher of yours by forging the signatures of your father! Not in Ben Franklin's Report Card! Here you are yourself the teacher, the student and the parent. There is no scope for forgery or playing truant in this school of self learning.

Learning through challenges is another extremely practical way of education. Here adversities become your teacher and you take cues from your instincts. In circumstances where you create your challenges deliberately and consciously, your spur may come from your guts and training. Samuel Smiles said, 'Not facility, not ease; but difficulty and effort make a man'. Well, history is witness to this wise quote. A very very large number of great men and women of the world have been the product of difficulty and not facility: Adversities and challenges educated them and turned them into super achievers. And there is nothing mythical in this. Why difficulty and not ease plays a greater role in the making of man, rests on one law of the Nature : Our mind is working more energetically in the face of difficulty.

All our actions, big or small are directly related to our mind. Studies after studies have corroborated that all our activities and performances are controlled by our mind. The mind has unlimited reserve of energy. When we decide to do a thing, the mind at once releases energy and we perform with the help of that energy. If we choose to do an easy task, then the mind will release lesser amount of energy. And if we decide to do a difficult or great thing, then the mind will release greater amount of energy. We all are born with the same mind having same amount of energy. Those who pass through challenges or create new challenges for them need more energy of the mind and the mind supplies them the same as per their requirement. It is as simple as your inhaling more Oxygen while running and very less while sitting. The reservoir of energy in mind is unlimited. It is for us as to how much of it we ask for and use for achieving tasks and for developing our personalities.

Here is a little wise story to tell us how adversity can educate. Once there was a king who received a gift of two falcons from Arabia. They were peregrine falcons, the most beautiful birds he had ever seen. He put the two birds in his personal garden to be trained by his head falconer and to keep them closer to him. After some time he noticed something strange. Whereas one of the falcons was flying majestically, soaring high in the sky, the other one kept glued to the branch of his tree, ever since he arrived. He would take the feed and water brought to him regularly by the bird keeper, but would not buzz from place of his stay. The king got worried and ordered immediate help from the wise and sage, the healers and sorcerers from all over the land, to tend to the falcon. But no one could make the bird fly. The king felt heartbroken and defeated. Then one evening, a rustic farmer appeared on the scene and promised the king to make the falcon fly next morning. The following day, before the break of dawn, as the king looked out of his window, he saw the falcon soaring high above the palace. A thrilled king rushed out to the garden and thanked the farmer in gratitude. He asked the farmer the question which was most natural, 'How did you do it?' The farmer replied demurely, 'It was easy Your Highness. I simply cut off the branch of the tree where the bird was sitting'. The adverse condition of losing the perching place, made the falcon fly.

For a more recent example, we could read the scene reports in press about the indigenously made boats out of unconventional materials by those flood marooned Srinagar folks who till then were experts only in carpet weaving or paper machie work. An uneasy and adverse condition taught them to make boats without wood.

For many, belief too is a way to seek knowledge. I quote here, Luke 11:13 – 'So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone that asks receives, he who seeks finds and to him that knocks the door will be opened'. Guru Nanak said that when it comes to God, we have to learn to give up our ego and knowledge gained through schooling and be willing to learn as if we do not know anything. 'Satori' is a Japanese Buddhist term for awakening, 'Operating Thetan (OT), is a spiritual state of being above Clear, the Concept of Elysium, of Seventh Heaven or of Nirvana; are all a form of holy belief and higher learning.

And belief does not work at a religious level only. Belief creates biology. Our every body cell is influenced by the way we think and feel. Our belief has the tendency of altering or modifying our biochemical profile. So, it is said that believing is doing in its half. Shakespeare goes a step further and says, 'We are such stuff, as dreams are made of'. Autobiographies of many great men prove right this most quoted bard of English literature. The great philosopher who ruled the Roman empire, Marcus Aurelius, summed self belief in eight words, 'Our life is what our thoughts make it'.

Early in my youth, I was criminally reckless abut wasting time. Neither my thoughts, nor my actions were under my control. My life, no doubt was a sure recipe to failure. Even though I was fond of reading books, the books known as self help books and the men called life-skill instructors were hardly known then. Gita, then had not been defined as yet to be a great personality development thesis, nor Lord Krishna was recognized as the greatest life coach. My belief in myself, however, remained intact, even when I was rudderless and directionless. My urge to learn was my life jacket in those days of getting drifted here and there. This belief served me well and helped me in making a small career in civil services and in writing.

Many more means of learning have been practiced by different people at different times. For Columbus, it was exploring new world; for St. Augustine 'The world is a book and those who do not travel' read only a page'. For Elbert Einstein 'Imagination is more important than learning' and for Bacon' All knowledge to be his province.' For ancient Greeks like Aristotle, question/answer was a form of learning and for ancient Indians 'Silence' sometimes was an invitation to the supreme truth – the knowledge of all knowledges. In modern times, technology is the new vehicle of learning and life engineering is the new science and art of seeking Self.

The modes and methods of learning could be endless. As the human brain is bestowed with many possibilities, knowledge too has many faces. As long as the human wish of learning from womb to tomb continues to persist, new forms of learning will keep evolving. Learning must be like looking into a wide valley of mountains, lakes, meadows and the happy villages strung all over. It must never turn into a window vision or a key hole sight. An unknown author comes ringing bells into my ears. He says, 'People who look through key holes are apt to get the idea that most things are key hole shaped'.

Many religious and political champions want us to believe in that key hole learning. They all must be spurned. Learning is a confirmed polygamist. It will never remain one-man, woman. It is available for all and can be reached through any number of routes. Knowledge and goodness are Godly materials and God has no time for religion and politics. After All, He is busy in fighting for us. Yes, against the Satan living in his neighbourhood. And as I write this, a new learning is getting unfolded before me. The God's reason of keeping Satan within a stone's throw and the Good and Bad in neighbourhood! He wants us to remain in a constant learning mode. How can you learn to escape a pitfall, unless there is one in your way? And He teaches by being a model and not from the pulpit. So, one more method of learning could be to look out for a model. Being one is also welcome!

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30

Recipe of Inspiration

Maricel Apatan is so full of hope that one would love to meet her in person. But that is not possible, as the 22 year old life chaser works as a Hotel Chef in Manila. Knowing about her, however, is possible. And that is what I did. She speaks a language which has been the language of heroes and doers. Like all achievers, her belief lies in an unflinching hope and faith in the abundance of possibilities. 'You dream and work hard and believe that nothing is impossible'. She, however, provides a supplementary as well, to this generally tested, still scarcely practiced, magic of 'Dreaming and Hard Working'. 'And pray', she adds softly. She has all the reason to put her faith in prayers. She after all, has looked into the eyes of death from a distance which could barely be in centimeters.

It was in September 2000 when she was attacked by five machete wielding men who were forcing Marcel's family off their land. (So, this forcible land grabbing exists in other parts of the world too. With rise in real estate worth around our towns, the scene here is getting harsher by the day). She was only eleven, but had the cleverness to pretend death before the marauders. Later, with nothing but her courage as transport, she negotiated an arduous and tricky track to reach a hospital. The death was defeated, but only after paying a price. The doctors could not save her hands. Her beautiful arms, now, will terminate at wrists. That is when her struggle begins and we get a recipe for inspiration.

Struggling to cope up with her disability, she had to depend entirely on her mom. Mothers, in our part of the world, too manage the affairs of their physically challenged children with patience, compassion, skill and sensitivity. Mothers are mothers and happen to be similarly cut-out everywhere on this planet. But, unfortunately, so are the school children, as well. When she returned to school, teasing by classmates often left her in tears. It happens exactly the same way over here too. As in our society, so in our schools, there is a common tendency of scoffing at those who happen to be incomplete in their limbs or deficient in some faculty. We, the descendants of a great civilization, read our scriptures with a frenzied devotion but willingly fail to respect our Ashtavakars.

Filipino schoolians may behave like those of ours but, mercifully, their governance mechanism, their civil society and their religious groups are alive to the needs of the disabled. Soon Maricel Apatan, the child without a set of hands, is arranged to be put in a rehabilitation centre called as House' with No Steps. This is a training centre for people with disabilities. She learned there how to write and do her chores and more importantly, came in terms with her disability. A new faith evolved. She says, 'I believe I had an important mission in life because I survived the attack'.

The ever increasing number of disabled and maimed beggars in our towns should be the reason enough for us to have our rehabilitation centres. Those of the differently challenged who have their own homes and families, need also to be put in Special Schools/Centres to acquire skills as per their capacity. Normal schools will only remain an apology for this class. Maricel eventually finished high school and then obtained a two year hotel and restaurant management diploma. When managers at the Edsa Shangri La Hotel saw her on television, they hired her as part of their hotel's Care for People Project. That again is unlike us. How many in J&K Corporate world have any idea of Corporate Social Responsibility? A state which claims its tourism industry as a flag ship industry providing a reasonable support to the hotel industry, would be doing good to tax payers' money; if it contemplates to advise the concerned to devise some Care for People Projects.

Maricel, the Chef is very good at decorating cheese cake and pastry. She uses her wrists for the purpose. As she grips a chefs knife tightly between her hip and left inner elbow and uses her left wrist to delicately slice grapes and strawberries; she hums gently. The arrangement of fruits on the cake, blueberry fillings and the elegant chocolate curl on the top is perfect. The hope to attain this perfection and to subsequently dish out their recipes is hers; the means are not. Means for all such physically challenged have necessarily to come from the State or the Society or both.

Many in J&K State are waiting to attain this perfection and to subsequently dish out their recipes. But the means are shamefully inadequate. Few NGOs like J&K Samaj Kalyan Kendra are doing a fine job. But lack of adequate efforts and financial support from the government or from those who have yet to awake to their social responsibility, is a great deterrent both to keep going and to conceive new designs of training and education as per the need.

We have our local heroes too. Many of our own physically challenged youth can be seen eking out a respectable livelihood through small rural crafts. Imagine what they can do if they could be specially trained for better callings. We may then have not to look to Sweden or Philipine for a hero for his/her recipe for inspiration.

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31

A New Resolution on New Year

Quite a few of us believe in rearing resolutions, now and then. Generally, such resolves come into being on some special days. Like, millions of them are born on one single day, all over the world. Yes, our New Year resolutions which we fasten upon ourselves with rare 'entheos' of lovers. Our list of 'do's' and 'do not's' for the year! A regular morning walk, a regular physical fitness regimen, a regular diet control, a regular study/work schedule, a regular worship and many more 'do's'.

And 'do not's' are like – no procrastination please, no 'killing' of time (as if the time can be killed!), no disobedience to parents/teachers/bosses/customs/culture/religion etc. Some of us are even more specific. Like they resolve to say no to bottle (Alcohol), to stick (smoke), to dope (drugs), to sex (extramarital)! The adventurous ones, however, go beyond the mundane and promise to change the world.

And yet, many of these resolutions which are born on January 1st don't happen to see a third moon. They face a premature demise and are neither mourned nor remembered till their day of resurrection i.e. January 1" of the following year. Strangely, this has been going on since the times men first learnt to resolve. Breaking of the promise is as old as the promise itself; as the framing and flouting of the rules were born, almost simultaneously.

Let us, therefore, commit ourselves to a different resolution this year. Resolve to be happy and spread happiness all around.

In this modern world of knowledge, research and scientific analysis; a new unrest of the mind has come to the fore. And whereas, unrest is necessary for mobility, a frame for happiness is equally imperative. No doubt then, everyone, in these times, seems to be jumping the get-happier bandwagon. Happiness is making headlines, selling books, inspiring scientific studies and spawning 'Laughter Clubs' and 'Joyology Workshops'. Yoga too has taken on this form of joy. But the joy still eludes!

Even when I fully subscribe to the theory of Happy Nature versus Nurture, I tend to lay my faith on the authentic happiness and not the fleeting pleasures. If happiness is a state of mind, as they say, and 'well being' a matter of personal perception, then different methods (of nurturing happiness) will fit different people, Yet, most of us suffer from the JATC syndrome – believing that happiness is just around the corner. Thus, our happiness of acquiring a thing gives way to the wish of getting the other one. This goes on and brings a constant state of unrest and a feeling of inadequacy, For, we fail to understand that happiness doesn't lie in things.

Vedanta helps us change our focus from inadequacy to abundance. When we do that we become grateful for the bounty. The mind gets turbulent when it is full of unfulfilled desires and Vedanta provides us a unique method to put this turbulence to rest.

Happiness is the number of desires fulfilled divided by the desires harboured. Focusing on a high numerator, in a mindless pursuit, will never make us happy! Reduce desires, the happiness quotient will increase. Check up with yourself, whether the desire is in your interest or in line with your goal. If yes, fulfill the desire and decrease on' the denominator. If not, delete it and let the happiness quotient grow.

The modern researches also say that happiness is measurable, buildable. Genetics, they say, accounts for about fifty percent of your happiness quotient. Health, Wealth, Education and Good Looks bring only ten percent in normal cases (not in cases of illness or poverty). The rest is All your doing towards happiness. This means that only meager ten percent of happiness depends on the life circumstances and a good forty percent of happiness is manageable.

Resolve this year to manage which is manageable and increase your Happiness Quotient. Be in company, count your blessings, think of positive experiences and add up, rely on memorable and not material, get the funny side of life, create a stress-free zone, see the glass half-full. Seize the moment and be creative. AN artist lies inside us all-find it. Be good and kind. Acts of kindness are best source of well-being.

Spreading happiness should be almost a religious duty with you. But to give happiness, you need to have happiness. You can only give in alms what you have. Jalal-un-Din Rumi said, 'You were born with wings. Learn to use them to fly'. Similarly, you were born with a cry – but that was a cry of joy. A joyous announcement of your having arrived! Keep up! Make the world happy! Let the onset of this New Year put into you that old joy of having arrived. Happy New Year to You All!

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32

Money Matters

A wonderful book came my way just accidently. Whereas my accident may not amuse you, the book certainly will. “Rich Dad Poor Dad” by Robert T. Kiyosaki is a personal finance book. A passionate advocate for financial education, the writer believes that present school education provides no learning about money. His lesson one : The Rich Do not Work For Money, they have Money Work for Them.

He rejects the old idea that you need money to produce money and propounds that ideas generate money. And he gives examples of many rich people who started poor but acting (and risking) with ideas which were bold and new, made money. His stress on the art of selling goes up to a ludicrous level but has a point. In order to prompt a best but un-selling writer, he advises her to join a sales school. And when the writer takes offence, he quips candidly : “You have yourself marked me as a best-selling writer in your notes. Mind you, best selling writer are not necessarily best writers. I am not a great writer but I am a great salesman, because I studied in a sales school. You are a best writer and if you learn the art of sales, you can become best selling best writer”.

Unlike your financial planners, who advise you to save money, Kiyosaki advises to invest money. And I think he is as similar in his advice as that old Indian farmer who gave his grain stock to his four sons to keep till his return from his four month Teerath Yatra. Three sons stocked the grains safely so that their father receives them as good as those were at the time of giving. But the fourth son was brainy, and willing to take the risk of investing rather than saving. He sowed the grains as seeds and yielded a return ten times over. And who did the father applaud on return. Not those who remained true to his advice of 'keep till his return'.

Financial Literacy is a vital skill to build business. But it is not mere accounting. Understanding markets, tackling the issues of demand and supply or when and and where to invest are the technical skills which require attention. However, seeing that which others miss is what brings the booty. Inner fire is what sustains the boxer to keep punching till the ringing of the bell. FEAR and FIGHT can never go well together. He appears to be giving lessons in treading unconventional paths when he says," ... to live a life dictated by the size of a monthly-pay-cheque is not really a life. "And he provokes us further by adding 'thinking that a job makes you secure is lying to yourself'. His belief lies in harnessing money's power, to let money work for you and not the other way round. But he puts caution clause too. "Money without financial intelligence is money soon gone".

His best advice appears to be : Converting ordinary income into passive or portfolio income. Ordinary income is money you work for and passive portfolio income is money working for you. This is one lesson which should have come to me many many years ago. WHAT then, enjoying the theory is also learning!! But all is not candy with this man. When he oversteps, he hurts my sensibilities. Entering into an intended argument about the accomplishments of his Rich Dad and Poor Dad, he unashamedly sides with the former who is poorly educated but is money making wizard. The latter, who happens to be his biological father too, is highly educated and learned man, but since he is not inclined to master financial literacy and is satisfied with a monthly salary, the son Robert T. Kiyosaki is not inclined to stay on the page of his poor Dad. Some may like to call this ambition, I don't. Education should never be allowed to play a second fiddle to money, even when education too needs money. A greedy love of lucre is generally not approved by most of the world cultures even when Lakshami Pujan is a common practice among Hindus.

Well, it is true that most of us are trapped in a cycle of work, earn, spend and save; living under a constant fear of not having enough. To that extent money certainly appears to be running our lives. But man does not live by money alone. Emotion which is also called 'energy in motion' serves us in many ways and Robert's sermon on emotion is unacceptable. He says, "Learn to use your emotions to think, not think with your emotions." Does he want us to live in Plato's Republic where poets (poetry is at once bracketed with emotions) had no place? Using your emotion to think could mean that you keep your heart (and as a conquence love, affection and empathy) out of your thought process. Such system of thinking may generate more money for you but will encourage Machiavellianism.

Seeking new ways to make money and trying to chase away want is the need of the new emerging world of expanding possibilities, but if you find that you have dug yourself a hole, stop digging. Japanese are said to be in love with three things : Sword, Jewel and Mirror. And we know that whereas, the first and second stand for power and money the third stands for self-introspection. So, friends keep digging Mackenna's gold and endeavour to possess the finest sword, but never forget to keep a mirror in your pocket. Money is honey, but the beehive you extract it from must be clean. We Indians have a special predilection for fair (read white) skin, then why should we get attracted to black when it comes to money. Love money but only the white one!

Bankers' old philosophy that 'you take care of your pennies, pounds will take care of themselves', is obsolete in this new world of capital economy. Making money like making love is in fashion and even communist CHINA is bitten by this bug. China Youth Daily reports : First June is celebrated as Children's Day in China and parents take their children to museums and parks over the weekend. But this June more than three hundred parents took their children to visit a luxury holiday villa in southern city of Qingyuan, apparently in the hope that it will inspire the youngsters to seek riches when they grow up. Showing children the trappings of wealth in order to encourage them to desire success is aspirational tourism, I think, it is time for us to teach in our schools the subject called Money together with other subjects. Money matters now cannot be left at the mercy of Lady Luck. I regret for searching security in a monthly pay-cheque and thus leading an unadventuresome life. Let my children not do that. Working for wages in a government office for the best part of your life seems very unromantic in retrospect.

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33

Of Paying Rent to God

Most of us believe that it is the GOD who made this earth and the sky and the Sun and the Moon. He the Almighty and ruler of all the rulers made the mountains the meadows, the seas, the lakes, the trees, the flowers, the air and water. And then he made men and women (for some it may be Adam and Eve) and sent them to live in these lands and live for free. To draw on to sunlight everyday and suck God's air every second of their living, again for free.

'Do we pay any rent to God for the facilities he has placed at our disposal. Have we signed any lease deal with God or paid him an advance. No nothing and surprisingly we even refuse to consider ourselves to be his tenant. We think that we are the master of the lands, the oceans, the forests and all the water bodies full of sweet water. We have taken God for granted'. 'Even when we keep believing that God has made everything on this earth, we don't tend to believe that he is the actual owner of almost everything. He is not only the Lord, he in fact is the Land-Lord too. Not only the master of our lives but the master of all other material possessions also. He also has never taxed us for the air or the sun, the rain and the snow. He believes in giving us everything for free. And we in turn hardly consider these free of cost services to be a favour. Instead feeling obliged we take all this for granted. If it is the God who has made everything then How we the men and women who are toys in this world; (courtesy that supreme power) can be owning the things we think to be owing; our family, our house, our farms, our factory, our car and practically everything we have and claim to be in possession of. We even register many of these properties in our names. We purchase and sell properties but if the God is the real owner then, is not that safe purchase an illegal process.

I am not talking insane, I am telling you a way out. We can pay rent to God for all that he has given us. How? By rendering a selfless service to the poor, the needy, the sufferer. God has purposely kept some of the humanity in poverty, want and pain so that the others who are better placed, could provide succour to the sufferer and thus pay their rent to the God. And then He keeps this process of want and excess in cycles. In this 'Janam', I am the one who is given enough and am expected to dole out help to those in want. Next 'Janam' I am in want and someone with abundance is expected to come to my aid. But how many of us on this earth consider this rent Paying obligatory ad mandatory ? Not many, because unlike our rent collecting land-lords of the world or the tax collecting Governments, God doesn't send us the 'notice' or an 'eviction order'. He also would not drag us into a court of law to obtain a decree against us for nonpayment. He will also never think of extracting the rent payable to him through some muscle men (as often done by estates owing men). He is so great that he surprisingly ignores our being a defaulter and would never publish our name with photograph as a defaulter (like the bankers of the world do). Despite such huge concessions allowed; why can't we be thinking of paying our dues voluntarily. By rendering service to his men and Women, by protecting and providing for his animals or by letting his plants grow as high as they wish to and many more things. But if you believe in God you also believe that he has a 'Chitragupt', the accountant who keeps the accounts of good and bad deeds of every human being. Different religions put their art of accountancy of the God differently. For some it is 'Yoma Hesab i.e. the day of reckoning and for some it is 'The Day of Judgement'. Most of us believe that God may be soft land-lord, but he is a very hard accountant. Like Bankers there are his people who are also expert in maintaining the ledgers and preparing individual pass books with debit and credit details So better clear all those outstanding liabilities, which you owe to him, before your departure from this world : His 'Chitragupt' that reportedly is more like Shakespeare's Sherlock; may ask you for his pound of flesh. I mean if we defer our liabilities of rent paying till we meet this accountant, we will be charged an interest also and it could' be a compound interest.

However, I can tell what God would not ask you, I was told these three things by a wise man I pass this on for your benefit. First, God would not ask about the square footage of your house. He would not ask about the size and cc's of your car, he will ask how many people you welcomed in to your house. He will ask how many people you drove who did not have transportation; third, God 'would' not ask what your highest salary was he will ask if you compromised your character to obtain it. And mind you, this is only a sample. He will certainly ask many more questions, like our Judges do in open courts, while adjudicating in a case. God will ascertain many more aspect of our deeds and misdeeds before passing his judgement. He is not a cruel or punishing God. He is judicious, compassionate and a reformist. But are we willing to attend his reformatory, which is here only around us. He desired us to render selfless service and not only to feed our ego's fat. He desires us to practice 'Daan', 'Zakat' charity or alms giving but without trumping it. And with the humanity of the humble. He desires us to wipe out as many tears as we can but with the compassion of a 'mother'. He desires us to spread joy but like the natural cheerfulness of a child. He desires us o be virtuous but not to wear our virtuosity on our sleeves. He wants us to be doing many good deeds over, but above all he wants us to carry a soul in our beings- the one which was originally coined by him and which we allowed to be injected by the seven deadly sins. 'Pure Joseph Addison, probably knew his God well; so he defined charity in its Godly spirit. "Charity is a virtue of the heart and not of the hands". God is no 'Romeo but he certainly has a 'Romeo like obsession for pure souls. Be pure and you would be paying your first installment of the rent you owe to him. But, we are bad pay-masters. In our bid to be happy defaulters of almighty, we perpetuate his image of a service-provider and not as one who lends his services on payment. This is our most convenient method of enjoying a tenancy/facility without paying rent. 'We willingly make payment at the public lavatory when pressurized by our bowls, but are simply not willing to pay for the air, the absence of which for more than hundred twenty seconds could take away our life. We happily make payment for a bottle of blood when required to be pumped into our weak body but would never even think of making a small payment to that God who had provided us a system which is capable of converting vegetable into blood.

God is a very lenient land-lord and is a very poor businessman. He is a careless lender and his recovery officers may appear to be not duty conscious. But, don't forget his accountant is very meticulous. He maintains the ledger to the last decimal. You will certainly not escape paying the God's rent. Why wait for 'Chitragupt', why not pay here now and in interest free installments. God will allow you to pay in installments and exempt the interest as well. The preached practice of offering 'Dashant' i.e. 10% of your earning is fairly straight. As straight as the 10% of my income is being compulsorily taken away by the income tax department. The only difference is Dashant gives me peace and pleasure, whereas income-tax deduction gives me pain, lots of it and this department has the authority to make me poorer up to even 30% of my hard earned income. And they are doing this in the name of collecting funds for public service. Is that money being judicially used? Well we all know the answer to this one! And many get raided for dodging Income-tax. God will never raid your premises or properties like those Income-tax guys. But his 'Chitragupt' will give you your balance-sheet when the time comes. Better to pay here than there. And you know that your payments will be put to judicious use.

"Cynics can ask' How about those atheists and agnostics they would' certainly not believe that they owe any rent to God. Well, the witty 'Bernard Shaw exposes atheism as under.: "I am an atheist and I thank God for it". G.K. Chesterton goes a step further, "if there were no God, there would be no atheist". And if you still think that you don't owe any rent to God, understand the import of this lovely joke. A Scientist approaches God and says" Look God we don't need you any more. Nowadays we can do on our own everything that was once considered miraculous. We can transplant organs, giving new life to a dying man; we can cure almost any disease and we can even coin animals and humans. So, I am sorry, you are just outdated". God listens patiently to the Scientist and says, "I can see that you believe, you don't need' me and I understand. However, I love you and I don't want to see you make a big mistake. I say why don't we have a man-making contest, just to be sure". The Scientist replies, "I will take that challenge. So God says, "Okay, lets do it the way I did it in the old days, with Adam and "Eve". The scientist then reaches down to scoop a handful of clay from the earth to form Adam and 'Eve. "Wait hold on a minute", says God," Get your own clay please, this one belong to me.

Having persuaded one and all to believe in the proprietary rights of the God on all worldly facilities, (If at all I have succeeded in this persuasion) and the necessity of our paying the accruable rent, I hasten to add' that God, after all is no banker, money lender or real estate owner. Bankers have always been notorious for two things- that they would insist on lending you an umbrella on a clear weather day but would compel you to return it, the moment it begins to rain; They only deal in currency for purposes of 'lending's' and recoveries'. And money-lenders and real-estate owners are famously notorious for profiteering. God on the contrary, is compassionate, benevolent and does not insist on rent in cash only. Repayments of all lending's are also not stressed upon. Part payments are also glady accepted. Further He he also permits us to pay in kind. And this Payment in kind is even easier. Love and empathies with His creation and your Life-Pass-Book will show some entries in the credit-column. Make his creatures happy, indulge in eschewing pain. Of others, spread peace at least when spreading prosperity is not within your means.

'Respect and honour all which you think has been created by the Almighty and help in preserving all which God had initially bestowed upon us. If you do this, your rent stands paid. No 'Chitragupt' will be allowed then, to ask for the 10%. Pleasing God-the Master of all of us – is not as difficult : as our priests and preachers have been telling us. He has a heart of candy. You only need a little of water to melt that candy. Only that this melting does not take place through H2O. His heart melts through our good deeds. And he has an uncanny predilection, For 'Deeds', when it comes to comparison with 'Daan'. But paying our rent through both, would be the best bet.

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34

Let Your Dreams Walk

Do you wish to be small or big; timid or bold; open or closed; knowledgeable or ignorant; worldly wise or merely bookish? You know you would not like to be latter in the above pairs of attributes. Neither would I! Well, let us make more similar pairs, taking two opposite properties of life, living or being. Rich or poor; healthy or weak; beautiful or ugly; popular or notorious; famous or infamous; loved or hated; soft or hard; smiling or angry; humane or wild; brave or coward; sensitive or brutish; cruel or kind; friendly or unfriendly; honest or deceitful; active or passive; trembling or calm; holy or unholy; a giver or a beggar; good or evil. I need not even ask what you would like to be. And yet many of us get to be what we don't want to or had at least not desired to be, in the first place. Why do we tend to end on the wrong side of the above pairs when initially, almost all of us wish to be on the right side of what in totality could be called good, fine, pleasant and lovely and joyful. This is because as we grow we begin to get influenced by the things around. Our innate energies begin to get mixed up with external energies created by the men and women of the world and physical and social environment of the place where we get nurtured. Our mind, brain, heart, eyes, nose begin to think, feel, see and smell only that what we are exhorted to do through advice, education, customs, traditions, rituals, culture, religion, society and hundred and one other external factors. In the process our inherent self gets soiled and what emerges is not what we were or wished to be. We consciously or unconsciously come to be mirrors which don't reflect what we originally are. A distorted reflection emerges in that mirror which has been deliberately corrupted like the ones we see in those laughing- in mirror houses.

And the most tragic aspect of this whole process is that slowly we refuse to recognize the actual self and and start believing that this emerging new disoriented image is that we actually are. We begin to perceive and contemplate the world with a new vision, not realizing that the new images we are forming; are in fact not authentic, original or true. We become the product of a cartoonist, caricaturist or an unwieldy artist at the best. But we do not come to be the product of a photographer, a photographer of the old school. Because, now the computer technology is out to play with images and can change the shape of your nose, eyes, lips or whatever; should you wish to choose so. Raghu Roy, the Photographer who prided on his art, while being interviewed by Sudhir, the Cartoonist; said, 'You cartoonists and artists are apt in exaggeration, a photographer has no option but to tell the truth'. Our education by parents at home and by teachers in school, corrupts our innocence and makes us street smart (read shrewd, cunning and untruthful) apt in exaggerations like cartoonists and artists. The photographer in us dies slowly. And the selfies we shoot are, in fact, manipulated images.

And we develop a new set of beliefs – that is to fit in the crowd, to be acceptable, to be like others, to be a part of collective consciousness, to dream their dreams to nurture their aims in your heart. You also accept and entertain their fears and their philosophy of morals. Now their God is your God – the one who will punish you immediately for your acts which they think are not approved by God. And a vast sea of fear is spread around you. A fear of not doing this or not doing that! You not only become a salve, but begin to cherish your slavery. The world which was so lovely earlier now becomes a place of lurking foes and deep falls. You are advised not to trust anybody and tread cautiously. You are told not to love, because betrayals in love are floating all around;

you are told not to shake hands with warmth, because you will find other hands cold enough to dampen your spirits; you are told not to hug, because the other person may be hiding a dagger under his armpit. At places, you may even be told not to trust or befriend people of other caste, creed, religion, region or colour. You may be advised to read selectively and perform only which is approved by them. You would be told not to do all those things which earlier you might be aspiring hard to do. And the most tragic part of the story is that now you start believing that your earlier aspirations, ambitions, wishes, desires and likings were not right. Now you choose to be distrusting, cold and loveless, not even peaceable. You are no more the follower of a loving God. You are afraid of Him. You are full of apprehensions. Afraid of being happy for fear of inviting wrath of the gods! Afraid to celebrate life, because your partying with life may anger Death. And you refuse to live, because you are afraid of death. You put your ambitions, aspirations and desires under the tutelage of others because by now you don't trust your capacity of taking your own decisions.

What type of irreligious and unspiritual surrender is this ? If I am the image of God himself; If Atma is Parmatma; if Self is Supreme; if I am Brahm, if each individual is the unique creation of God; then why I am allowing the outside world to tamper with my Self like this. Not only tampering, but a sort of transforming too! Why? Is this not being anti-God? I am not an atheist, not an apostate, not even a communist in the context of being anti-individual and permitting my Self as a sacrificial goat at the altar of a commune or State. I celebrate Selfhood in its evolved form. I believe that each one of us is a unique creation and any tampering or morphing of the individual under the bogey of a Society or State or whatsoever is like sabotaging the sun or betraying the moon. It is biologically proved that no two individuals are identical. They simply can't have common possibilities unlike the herd of cattle grazing in a pasture or the pack of hounds frisking the dustbin for leftovers. Humans can think beyond stomachs and can't be bracketed.

Then, how do I allow the community or the world around to turn me into a common fish? Or to practice this socio-religious communism on me! And then, they do it with such aplomb that I fall in line like a devotee. As if they are successful magicians and I watch them with stand-still awe of a child, afraid of being turned into a pigeon or a rabbit on slightest movement. Julian of 'The Monk who sold his Ferrari' fame, explains this well to his disciple Dar in Robin's book 'Discover your Destiny'. The monk bellows out to this disciple, with a pumping fist into the air, : The process by which we leave our authentic Self and become people we are not – by taking on beliefs, values and behaviours from those around us, is known as 'enculturation'. And as we leave our true selves, morphing into social selves, a gap begins to form. We leave our original nature and assume the false mask of personality. We fall out of integrity; hence The Integrity Gap". We are made to believe that we are not under obligation to ourselves or a Self which all religionists believe to be the Creation of God and that we are under obligation to our samaj/society/ surrounding/people. And to fulfill this obligation, we try to be like them, to think like them, to dream like them, to do things like them. The concept of wider social acceptability takes precedence over exploring our personal possibilities.

So, we wear a social mask out of fear of others and aspire to be liked. And they only like you not love you. They only cohere to appreciate your mentality and your willingness to wear their caps and foot their shoes. And since weakness for praise is just human psychology we begin to cherish this approval of others. This is falling in their trap, but we commit a self betrayal and surrender our dreams for a space in the society. At heart we know that this was not the path we were supposed to track. We are, in fact, being dishonest to our original Self and in turn to God! And as this realization begins to dawn on us, a conflict or disharmony begins to appear on the scene. Our lives' peace and progress both get a punch in the belly.

What is the way out? Explore your Authentic Self, as early as possible. De-learn! Your parents at home and your teachers in school load you with traditional and orthodox knowledge only. Leave all that except the one which suits your self. Self awakening, Self realization, seeking your Self, knowing who you are, understanding that your soul is the real you and in the middle of this Soul – lives the God! Atma mein Parmatma are not mere jargons of a religion. These are the truths of your Self. Getting enlightened is not being wise enough to know the God; It is like allowing light into you to see and understand yourself, which has fallen prey to a net of layers or set of masks. Explore your possibilities and potentials and fear not to bring them before the sun. If you believe that you are sons and daughters of God, then behave like one. Greed, deceit, craze for possessions, hate, intolerance or war cannot be the ways of God and thus should not be the ways of His sons and daughters.

Galileo could do what he did only because he put his entire belief in his Self and ignored what others were saying about him. Same is true of Sufis, philosophers, scientists and the Greats. History is witness to the fact that all inventors and ideologists, philosophers and logicians, mathematicians and scientists have been 'doubting' Thomsons;. Their doubts of traditional knowledge motivated them to go beyond the ordinary and explore the extraordinary. A zen saying tells the tale very aptly and succinctly – 'Small doubts small enlightenment. Great doubts, great enlightenment'. Nurture your doubts about 'their' teachings on life, religion, philosophy, sociology and everything. Grow your doubts into questions and hunt for the answers. One answer will lead to another as one book leads to the other. In the process, you will shed your blinkers making you see your Self without layers or mask. Your 'Integrity Gap' will get reduced to zero. And you will reclaim your lost Self. Now you are free to do, what you are destined to do. This is the Awakening our scriptures talk about.

Most of us have been writing one particular essay for our examination in our high schools. It was – 'My aim in life'. Now try to recollect and see as to how many of your classmates have acted in their lives as per the written contents of their essays. Hardly a few! The reason is not that they failed to achieve their aim. The fact is that most of them mentioned their aim of life in that essay, not as per their desire or dreams. They wrote out what they wrote at the behest of their teachers or with a limited target of scoring good marks in their examination. But life is not a secondary school essay. What you aim to do in life is not necessarily your calling; it is your inner call. Unfold your dream and try to live it. It is never too late to love, to dream and to do what you wish to do. Trust your guts and your God and allow your Self enter into those realms of life which you wished to enter but dared not for fear of 'them' and the world. The Essential Life Span (ELS) of human species is only less than half a century; you may not have much time to live your dreams, despite addition of some years to ELS owing to better life conditions.

Listen not to the noises of the people; raise the volume of your inner voice and act without fear! Write on your mirror this lovely saying from Anais Nim, 'Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage'. Expand your life! Be not the victim of life or a mere spectator - be the master of life! Give feet to your dreams! Make them walk with you with the same gay abandon; you walk your pet every morning!

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35

A Lecture That Was Not!

I had an opportunity to visit my village school, recently. And a horde of memories came cropping. Some good some bad. Decades ago this was the place I hated most. It was when my father took me there to get me initiated into my schooling business. I remember having wept a lot and even biting the wrist of my first nursery teacher who had tried to tap my right cheek. It was much later that I realised my foolishness of not viewing that tap as an act of affection and assurance. Teachers those days were not made of soft material. They cared a hoot for things like child psychology or handling their taught with care. Care then was not a favourite attribute of fathers too. As if by a design, loving and caring was looked upon contemptiously, a trait considered unmasculine, and something to be practiced by female folk only. And back then the school education department used to have two separate directorates – one for male another for female. When in due course of time I cam to be Director School Education, the two wings were already a history. But then this very school, of those years, several decades before, had within a couple of months become my best bet and still is. My ten long years in this school are something which I would keep cherishing for the rest of my life. But this recent visit I want to talk about was my new first.

This school earlier knew me as a student, as a teacher, as an education-administrator. But this time I was entering the portals of my alma mater as a writer. Not that my native people knew not my passion for wielding the pen, but most of the young schoolies did not. The principal was anxious to introduce me to his wards as one who belonged to this school and had successfully worn more than one hat in this life race. I, however, had other plans. I wished to avail this opportunity to rub some school-time innocence to my worldly-wise body and by extension to my book-bedeviled brain. So once on podium and behind that designer stand, which hid me all below bust, I put my curved palms in front of my mouth and bellowed out a Hello, which could make window-glasses shiver with fear. But the newly built school-auditorium resounded with healthy Hellos. The principal fidgeted in his creaking chair, so did the chief guest. But these two were not my subjects for the day. My first contact with my subjects was made. They could gauge that I was not a traditional speaker. But my second action ignited their excitement to the peak. I pushed the lecture stand aside and jumped d~~r~~own the stage to be in the well of the hall which was called an auditorium but was actually having a flat-floor seating. The excitement around had now graduated to happiness. The faces of my listeners were lit by their inner sun, and good Jesus, my speech was yet to start.

But pedagogy, in that atmosphere of new found bonhomie was simply pass. What followed can be left to your imagination and I would not like to spoil the range of your vision. However, I cannot resist to intimate my intimates that this visit to my school has returned a part of my childhood to me. Enough to live by my oldage. It is a different story that the school principal is still cross with me. How a senior civil servant, even when retired, could behave the way he did and stole away the affection of his students? Well that principal would never get reply to this query, unless he wears my shoes. And joy is a shoe which will pinch not a principal, if it has not pinched one who was administering these principals, once.

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36

Why Are You in Hurry?

Whenever, I retraced my steps to walk into that past where my days of youth stand stored, an unnerving question would come cropping. "Why the young of today are in such a hurry ? Why leisure and laid-back attitude is being assessed rather negatively and hip-hop holidaying a measure to get rejuvenated." And it was often beyond me to understand as to how the cacophony of a pub or platform can bring peace to the mind. Wild or frenzied activities bordering on panic many pump-up your adrenal glands, may even stimulate your brain-bands, but Holy Smoke, expecting peace out of such a jump is, to my mind, seeking silence from a trumpet. For these upcoming young men and women of India – and mind you these new energetic Indian are no more confined to big urban centres only – speed is a necessity, multitasking a must, lunching on pizzas/burgers while being on wheels a fashion and counting additional zeroes on their pay cheques a passion. Hurry up or hurry man hurry are the morning mantras heard from their freshly brushed mouths and keep ringing in their ears till they hit the sack at mid-night. My morning mantra was a borrowing from Rig-Veda. Some days back, when we, a family of four, were eating ice-cream after dinner, my son suddenly pointed out : "Papa aren't you eating your ice-cream a little hurriedly ?

"Well, son you know I do not relish this sweet if it runs loose!" No one spoke for quite a long time. I, however, found that the air suddenly had turned mischievous along with two pairs of eyes – the eyes of my son and his wife. And then he spoke with a deliberate drawl in his speech. "Papa you always keep asking us as to why we are in such a hurry. Well this ice-cream is our answer." "What do you mean?" My query was laden with a visible disconcert.

"We take life like ice-cream. And we want to lap it up in full and while it is still tight and frozen. It too has a tendency to get loose and thus not remaining as palatable!"

I was looking at my son with eyes which appeared not to be mine. The other three pairs; third was my wife's; around there were wells of amusement. And that night I had a very strange dream. I was a young man and was enjoying all the hurry the others were in. And strangely I was not only at ease but perfectly peaceful too. The next morning, I left my bed wearing a new vision on my old lenses. When KARMA, KRAYA and KARTA are in sync, Shanti i.e. peace cannot remain elusive. 'Hurry spoils the curry' is a thing of the past. Young!

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37

Am I Depressed or Just Confused?

When I was studying in my village school a long time back, I was full of questions. Nothing unusual you may say. Well the unusual is that my wondering mind was not only snubbed at the hustings but was also ridiculed by my teachers. Questioning in my times was openly translated as impertinence, not only by teachers but by parents too. As I grew in age and underwent the annual grade jumping of a straitjacketed system of schooling, my inquisitive mind was churning out queries which could not be termed as puerile by even ancient standards. My doubts, however, earned me several nicknames instead of explanations. Eventually I was compelled to keep my questions to my self. The process of my embarking upon a life of introversion had commenced, unknowingly. Unresolved doubts lead to confusions, confusions to directionlessness. This then could expose you to wasteful activities and failures. And you loose that big thing which you once prided on. Your curiosity! And as you convert yourself to be a part of the common crowd you loose another most important attribute of yours. Your self-respect, I experienced all this and gradually turned sick-first only in mind but subsequently in body too. I suffered several types of medications : from allopathic to ayurvedic, from unani to homoeopathy (they then used to say-Desi and angerizi illaj). Nothing happened! A disease like depression was neither known to doctors and Hakim's of that village nor were they willing to accept it as a disease. Many of these shrinks are not willing to do so even now.

An ordinary soul, came in contact with me at this time of mental and physical turmoil. Ramsaran, a Brahman by birth, a grocer by circumstances, an anti ritualist by practice, a believer by faith, a lover of mythology, was a demure young man of abut thirty-thirty one. His poor business skills would not let him earn more than his needs. So he would scissor his needs to stitch his passion. I was marvelled by his passion for books when one day I landed in the middle of his posessions. Right behind the grocery shop was a big room which had a low height partition in the middle with a small recess to enter the other half. The first half of this room was his residence the second his library. A man who probably had more faith in written word than the spoken one, simply led me to his treasure house in silence. There he fished out a heavily jacketed book and passed it on to me. And then he spoke in his innocent, gullible voice, "Go home and read this book. No one has ever removed the doubts and confusions of the mind and heart better than the protagonist speaking out there." For once I killed my curiosity in deference to a grocer who, I thought, must exchange his job with some of my teachers! I neither asked any question nor opened the book then and there. This was my way of expressing my faith in that gentleman.

Hurrying home I was dying to read the title of the book. But by some strange intuition, did not do that on way. By not doing so I realised that some common quotes must not be taken figuratively – one of them being – curiosity kills a cat! This realisation came in good stead later. And the book was none other than the Hindu holy book, Bhagvad Gita. The seven hundred odd shalokas were read in three sittings and some chapters re-read many times over. I have never suffered from depression since then, but a question kept me haunting thereafter!.

Why it is so that thousands and thousands of our students have to still keep an Arjuna in them on a back burner for fear of getting ridiculed by their teachers and parents. Till all of them meet their Krishna, they will keep falling prey to that now commonly known disease called depression. Depression may have many sources but since it primarily lives in the heart of mind, a confusion free mind at an early age can prove to be proverbial' – nip the evil in the bud'!

38

Perfection is a Myth

Let me begin with a joke. There was a beautiful Indian woman of marriageable age. She belonged to a region where arranged marriages are almost like constitutional clauses- requiring huge majority to amend an existing provision. She managed to muster enough support and succeeded to secure the right to select her groom on her own. But a condition was put by the patriarchal society panchayat – The man selected by the woman has to be a true Mr. Right. There followed the happy search, which naturally took time. It is always difficult to hunt out a husband who is endowed with all the right things as per the personal definitions of a prospective wife. We all know that many men and women in this world get to lead a single life not because of their faith in celibacy but because they fail to meet their Mr. Right or Miss Right at the right rung of their age. At least in India where late- age marriages are hardly in fashion, my above remark cannot be dismissed, as statistics stand for this statement.

The woman under reference, however, was fortunate to meet her man in a matter of months only. And incidentally this young handsome man had been christened by his doting parents (he was an only son ad had six sisters) as Right. This child Right was now known as Mr. Right. The parents of the girl were pleased to see this slightly effeminate personality as they believed that this man would not only be a doting husband to their over indulgent daughter but will also be submissive type. The panchyat, however, was reluctant on the ground that the groom appeared to be openly uxorious type and could cause imbalances in their male dominated households. The innocent looking young fellow, read the pulse of the Elders and requested them to speak in private for a few moments. When the five members returned to the big Dewankhana after a word with the prospective bridegroom, they were not only grinning from ear to ear but were also heartily patting the young man, in turns of course. The girl, the parents, the assembly there, all were astonished. As the modest looking would-be-groom was now smiling mischievously, the girl was all winners.

Then the head-man rose and said : "This young man is worthy of the woman there. We know now that he is capable of protecting our traditions and his full name has convinced us on this score". The air turned pregnant with astonishment. But the girl, now, was growing apprehensive. "What full name!", she murmured in silence. The reply came from the speaker." Gentlemen, this boy's full name is, Mr. Always Right, and he would make perfect match to our daughter there". Perfect, my foot, cried the girl between her lips and left the big drawing-room of her parental house. Never to return to a place where she had learnt her lesson, the hard way – that Mr. Right have generally a full name called Mr. Always Right.

You may be wondering about this joke and thinking that what type of joke this is, which does not make you laugh. You may not laugh please, because this story is no joke. This happened to the people, at the place, in a time which belong to me. And so I say that perfection is a myth. If you desire to live relationships in full or keep your hunt humane, learn to give grace marks. In life, living, relations, no one may pass without grace marks!!!

There is a Korean proverb : "Human's are not perfect. Neither are experts on their designated areas of expertise. So if you are a mathematician and you solved a problem incorrectly, it does not matter. Even experts make mistakes some times."

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39

Is Happiness a Grocery Item?

In this new age world of "paisa phenko tamasha dekho" (money has the power to purchase) happiness is the most misunderstood thing. Yet this is one thing which is being sold without a sale voucher. Since the sellers are not registered and not liable to pay vat or sales tax the sold product has neither a provision of cash refund in case of defective supply, nor any possibilities of consumer court redresses. This industry is only second to Fortune Tellers market. But in the case of later only few gullible are getting entrapped. As for happiness vendors, almost one to all are inclined or rather enthusiastic to take their bait. Why? Because happiness is what one wants after physical needs are satisfied. In the modern world of abundance and excess (when a fairly large section of world populace is free from want) life is countenancing a leisure and spare time. Now spare time like spare money is gregarious by nature and needs to engage into some enterprise. It is here that happiness traders come to do business and mint money. Lectures, workshops, books, sermons, are sold for a price. Dear friends My surmise is simple and clear. Should you pay for something which is lying with in you?

When your own organs are functioning to perfection, would you go for a transplant ? I would love to kiss Bernard Meltzer for his saying, "happiness is like a kiss. You must share it to enjoy it. "I could only add, a mouth knows how to receive food, a sex organ knows where its bliss is hidden and a heart is well versed to explore happiness. Happiness is a sought thing not a taught thing. Like blood it is running in your body every moment, feel it as you feel your pulse. Happiness is no industry and you are not an employer, let so called well-being coaches not feed on your money. God has given you the art of being happy and derive wellbeing from yourself. Why go purchasing a thing which is your own produce.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

This book is a collection of personal essays, spread over several subjects varied in variety, colour, tenor and tone. Each piece of writing is an experience in life, knowledge, wisdom and wit, put in a language which is at once interesting and imaginative. As the essayist invites the readers to travel through his mind and heart, the readers will surely become a part of emotive expressions of the author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darshan Darshi is the pen name of D.K. Vaid, a retired Civil servant. A Sahitya Akademi awarded Dogri Poet, he has written in almost all genres of Dogri Language & Literature, including literary criticism.

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